

# STILL NOT AT NIGHT

Edited by

CHRISTINE CAMPBELL THOMSON



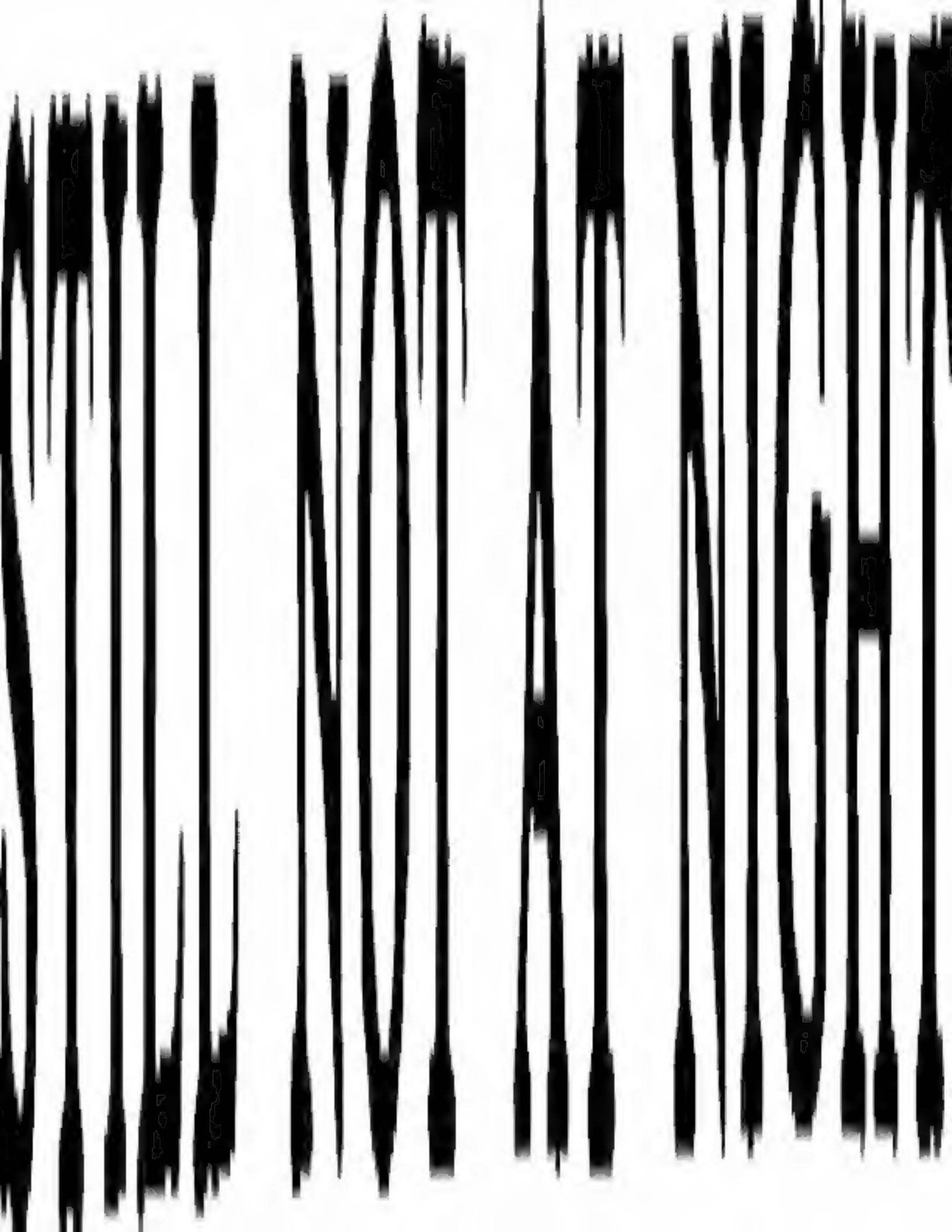
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# STILL NOT AT NIGHT

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Fear stalks through this macabre collection of stories, the third selection made for Red Arrow from the world-famous NOT AT NIGHT stories. The backgrounds range from East to West—from India, Borneo and the West Indies to the more familiar but none the less terrifying backgrounds of London and New York, with a passing stay in Middle Europe, Switzerland and the English suburbs.

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Arrow Books edited by

CHRISTINE CAMPBELL THOMSON

NOT AT NIGHT

MORE NOT AT NIGHT

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ARROW BOOKS

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# INTRODUCTION

It is said that you cannot have too much of a good thing and no apology therefore is needed for introducing a third volume of stories from the old NOT AT NIGHT Series in the new Series published over the Arrow imprint.

Here again we range widely from East to West—from India, Borneo and the West Indies to the more familiar but none the less terrifying backgrounds of London and New York, with a passing stay in Middle Europe, Switzerland and the English suburbs.

The Editor and the Publishers are convinced that the readers who so nobly supported the first two volumes will not be disappointed in the third.

CHRISTINE CAMPBELL THOMSON



# KING COBRA

JOSEPH O. KESSELRING

I HAVE opened my eyes in the black unlighted hold of a holy Kiao-chow funeral junk and looked up into slanting, glassy, dead eyes that gleamed and winked impossibly down at me from nowhere. I have stretched forth my hand in the stinking inky darkness of a Johore burial pit and touched something cold, wet and soft—and it moved. I have watched in Africa while a hand, small, soft and ivory-white, literally grew from the naked belly of a prostrate, bewitched Upoto black; reached up, found his throat, and rested there, then disappeared, slipping back again into the ebony body—and that black was dead from strangulation! These things and others, equally unbelievable and horrible, I have seen and touched, while cold sober and with no fever in my bones.

These things, I say, I have experienced; yet never have I suffered such unholy dread and revulsion as that which I felt that night in Java when I looked at the man who called himself Wharton.

'I am Wharton,' he had croaked in answer to my hoarse question—and staring, I sweated and shook as with the dengue fever.

This thing, this creature crouching there on the tiny wharf that jutted out into the reeking Salo River, it could not be Wharton! It could not be *human*! My flesh crept . . . it was like a spider—a monstrous, fat spider—dressed in the clothes of a man! The ghastly Malay moon shone down full upon him—or it!

Round at the middle he was—suddenly, ridiculously, poisonously round at the middle. Below that awful bulge the legs stretched, long, bowed and bent, and of one skinny thickness from thigh to foot. Above the bulge, the narrow chest rose, tapering upwards to the more narrow shoulders. From the shoulders the fleshless arms hung tensely, ending, one of them, in a bony curling hand; the other—I found it hard to believe my eyes—the other ended in a *blade*! Minus his left hand, the creature wore a broad knife-blade affixed in some manner to the stump! It glittered coldly.

Above the narrow shoulders, atop a pipestem neck, was a bald and shining death's head. Loose lips fell away from a bulging naked skull. And eyes! What eyes! Deep in the head they were, the whites showing like half-crowns, the centres tiny as tack-heads, and black—gleaming, boring black. As though hypnotized, I continued to stare, those eyes on mine not four feet away.

I was standing in a dugout. At my feet a pop-eyed, native boat-boy sat holding the craft to the wharf. The monthly copra steamer having run a week before, I had hired the boy at the mouth of the Salo, and it had taken a five-guilder bribe to conquer his then incomprehensible aversion to ferry me. His eyes on the man ashore, he was a picture of terror.

The man ashore, according to a communication from American headquarters received by me ten days before in Singapore—being Robert Wharton, was manager of the Surabaya Rubber Plantation, a holding of my company, the United outfit. This communication had informed me of a fifty per cent dropping off of Surabaya production during the last two months. The deficiency had not been satisfactorily accounted for by the manager. Rambling letters offering fever and coolie insurrection as excuses had been received. My communication had ordered me to investigate.

Leaving Singapore immediately, I had shipped to Batavia (my first trip south of the Malay Peninsula) thence to Samarang, and from there by a grain tramp to the Salo. During the entire trip south and east I had carried with me a growing feeling of fore-

boding. Now, before this man who called himself Wharton, it reached its climax. There came to me a conversation, the gossip of two planters vaguely overheard on board the Batavia steamer. They had annoyed me then; I had been reading.

Now—what was it they had said? . . . Something about—about snakes—that was it! But there was something else . . . something deep in my mind roused by sight of this hideous human before me . . . something. . . .

I jerked to my senses. For seconds I had continued to stare into those tiny black eyes. Now the creature was laughing, a low, hollow sound. As he laughed, he swayed from side to side, from his outrageous belly up. There was a vileness in the sound and movement, an animal vileness. Shifting my gaze, I was unable to repress an exclamation. He ceased swaying, but his laughter continued.

'Ah!' he responded, a faint trace of Latin accent in his words. 'My sense of humour annoys you—yes? Or is it my eyes?' His laughter rose higher, then ceased abruptly. He pointed with the gleaming blade at the end of his arm. 'But what is your business?' he snapped. 'What do you want here?'

I began my response by tossing my grip to the wharf and stepping after it. My movement brought the creature's knife against my chest. I continued my response by telling him my name, Peter Garr, and my purpose of investigation.

'I have official papers of identification,' I went on. 'And will look over the books, works and trees, beginning tomorrow morning early. And just now.' I continued, 'just now, unless you take that knife from my belly, I'll rip it from your arm and throw it and you into the river.'

This last I said because at my words of identification the creature's pendulous lips had drawn farther from his teeth, his crouch had become a little more pronounced and the pressure of the knife had increased noticeably at my middle. Following my threat, I gave him stare for stare, and the beady, tack-head eyes wavered and shifted, the knife-arm lowered, the inhuman face twisted into what was undoubtedly meant to be a smile.

'A thousand pardons!' he croaked, bowing. 'You will excuse

an error of judgment. Ah, yes, a mere error of judgment. I welcome you.'

He chuckled again and again. I could not control a shudder. 'But you seem chilled,' he leered. 'Come, come! Where is my hospitality? A guest, the official ambassador of the mighty United, and I subject him to the chill of tropical Java! Tcht! Tcht! Most unforgivable! But I shall make restitution. Yes! yes! You shall be very comfortable here with me and my children till my assistant, Mr. Jackson, returns from the interior, when you may begin your investigation. Come, follow me.'

With the invitation, he seized my grip, turned and with a gait more suggestive of a crawl than a walk, moved from the wharf.

Tossing the boat-boy an additional guilder, I dismissed him and followed my strange host. Certain of his words stuck in my mind as I walked. He had spoken of his children. There was something dreadful, something sickening about the thought of that monstrosity being the father of children. I visualized them; three, six, a dozen tiny, bulbous-bellied, spider-like counterparts of the creature ahead of me. It made the flesh crawl.

I was walking rapidly and was now but ten feet behind him. I reflected on some of his words. He had mentioned his assistant, that he was away, that I would have to wait for his return. But none of that, I thought; I am not waiting for any one. But this assistant—Jackson, he'd called him. I had known there was an assistant, but somehow there was something that was not quite right. Now what was . . . ? By heaven, that was it! The assistant's name was not Jackson—it was Johnson! His pay cheques came through the Singapore office and I knew. . . .

My thoughts snapped off. I was six feet behind Wharton. Heavy growth lay fifteen feet to the left and right. There was a sound. With a jerk I ducked and went to my knees. A split second, and a Malay *kris* cut the air where my head had been. Flashing and swishing, it hurtled into the growth on my left. Only experience saved me. I knew the sound of a thrown *kris*. With a leap I was on my feet and ahead, my pistol in my hand. I jammed the weapon into Wharton's back.

'Use your authority!' I advised him. 'Any more stunts like that and it will mean lead in your hide!'

The tack-headed man turned as though in great surprise.

'Eh?' he inquired. 'Is something wrong?'

'You know damned well what's wrong!' I answered. 'Just a mite sooner, or lower, and that *kris* would have split my head like a pumpkin.'

'A *kris*?' The big-bellied one was incredulous. 'Did someone throw a *kris*? Dear me! At you? Dear, dear! I must apologize! That must have been George. George is nervous. I'll speak to him.'

He turned. 'George!' he called, and speaking in Malay, which to a limited degree I understood and spoke—commanded an unseen person to come forth.

There was a noise in the brush, a movement. I stared. Stepping from the shadows into the brilliant moonlight was the biggest, blackest negro I had ever seen. He was naked but for a loin-cloth. Like a giant dog he trotted to Wharton.

'George,' the spider-man said to him. 'Did you throw a *kris* at this gentleman?'

The huge black nodded and grinned, as though enjoying a harmless little joke. 'Saja, tuan' (yes, master), he answered.

'Why did you throw the *kris*, George?' Wharton asked him.

The negro's reply was to the effect that he thought me to be an enemy creeping up on his master from behind. I did not believe him in the slightest, but Wharton admonished him, chuckling evilly the while, and dismissed him. Putting up my pistol, I let the matter pass. I decided, however, that I would not be caught again for lack of vigilance. There was an air of something decidedly wrong about the place and its people; something wrong in an unhealthy, morbid way, and I determined to find out what it was.

My opinion of the place and its people was strengthened greatly a few moments later. As we rounded a turn in the road, the plantation house loomed up suddenly before us, ghost-like in the silver light. To the right of the house stood a connected series of rambling squat shacks. I later learned they were the

latex sheds and storehouses. The coolie quarters lay five hundred yards beyond, on lower ground, at the jungle edge. As we approached I discerned a group of native boys standing silent and quiet in front of the house. There were a half-dozen of them. Their utter stillness was strange. Malay boys—a Malay is a boy till fifty—Malay boys are by nature unpleasantly noisy.

Wharton paused, his knife arm stiffened. 'What is it?' he rasped in Malay.

Then I understood their quiet. Those natives, without actually moving, seemed to writhe, recoil and shrink before the spider-like *tuan*. Fear; abysmal grovelling fear was behind their silence. Stammering, one of them spoke.

'Cobras, *tuan*,' he quavered, and pushed forth a basket.

What happened in the next few moments added to a belief of mine that had been growing from my first sight of the plantation manager; namely that Wharton had gone mad. Chuckling throatily, his strange eyes gleaming, he shuffled forward and dropped to his knees by the basket. It was a shallow, round container, big at the bottom and tapering sharply to the top. He slipped the lid partly off and peered in.

'Three!' he crowed. 'Three bouncing beauties! Good, good! Who caught them?' Two of the boys spoke. 'Splendid—splendid!'—reaching with his skeleton hands to pat their backs. 'You shall be rewarded.'

He turned his head and beckoned to me. Unwillingly I crossed to him. As I neared, the evil, hooded head of a cobra thrust itself, hissing from the basket. The natives fell back. I shuddered. Wharton laughed crazily and leaned nearer the serpent.

'Come, come!' he urged me. 'Do not be afraid! There is no danger. Come nearer and meet three of my children, three of my lovely, naughty children. I have others, many others; you shall meet them later. Come!'

The awfulness of his words struck me. This was what he had meant before when referring to his 'children'! *His children were snakes! Deadly poisonous cobras! Wharton was insane! Dangerously insane!*

With his knife-arm he was thrusting the reptile back into the

basket. Replacing the lid, he cocked a tack-head eye up at me. 'So you believe me crazy, eh?' he chuckled; then he burst into a peal of wild laughter. 'No,' he continued in a moment. 'You are wrong. Peculiar, yes, but not crazy. Not I. But here'—he straightened—'perhaps I owe you an explanation. This'—he thrust forth the knife arm—'this was once a hand, a lovely hand. A cobra kissed it, and I was forced to cut it off. Phit!—like that; sever it with a *kris*!' He sighed. 'It was a beautiful hand. Since then I have studied the hooded beauties. I know them well. I have adopted thousands. A parent's privilege to instruct and chastise, you see.' He laughed. 'Yes, to chastise. I have dozens with me now, waiting to be instructed—and chastised. But understand,' he leaned closer as though waxing confidential, 'that beauty that kissed my hand, that was not one of these, that cobra. No, no! That was not an ordinary cobra like these. *It was a king cobra—a monstrous fellow twelve feet long!* He was the only king cobra I have ever seen. And I was forced to kill him so quickly, so quickly! But I hope. That was years ago, and still I hope. There are fifty guilders to the boy who brings me one. And the time is near, the time is near. Two have been seen not far from here.'

His face, hot with excitement, had been thrust close to mine. His breath was vile. My disgust getting the better of me, I backed away and shivered. He ceased speaking abruptly and glared murderously at me. Only for a moment, though, and then his hideous features twisted into a smile.

'Chilly again, Mr. Garr?' he leered. 'You need a rest . . . yes . . . a nice, long rest. I shall conduct you to your room. . . .'

Turning to the round-eyed natives, he instructed them to put two of the snakes to bed with their 'brothers and sisters' and bring him the other one. With a 'Follow me, Mr. Garr,' he shuffled off to the house, and I followed with my bag.

The room assigned to me opened off the large main room and seemed comfortable enough and safe. The two windows were tightly and permanently screened, and the door carried a bolt on the inside which I shot upon entering. I felt moderately secure and was glad of it, for it was quite late and I was dog-

tired. I undressed immediately, switched off the light and climbed into bed.

Almost at once I noticed a slight crack in the bedroom door through which light shone from the next room. It disturbed me. If there were lights, Wharton must yet be up. Why didn't the crazy beggar go to bed? I listened, and after a bit I could hear him moving in the lighted room. Several times I began to doze, but wakened sharply each time, the luminous crack before me.

For an hour I lay thus, my eyes heavy for want of real sleep, but unable to do more than doze while aware that that madman was still stirring. Finally in disgust I decided to smoke. I sat up. My feet touched the floor. I reached for the light cord, then stiffened.

For minutes there had been entire quiet in the next room. Now, echoing sibilantly, a new sound came to me from behind the door. *It was the hiss of a cobra!* There are few more blood-freezing sounds in the world. Following the hiss, another sound pierced the door; *Wharton's own bestial laugh!* I am not a coward, but there was something so unwholesome, so bestial, so damnable in that laugh following the hiss that the cold sweat stood out on my forehead. What in the name of heaven could the fiend be doing? Again came the hiss and again louder, and again; and Wharton's inhuman laughter seemingly timed to the hisses. Unable to stay longer in ignorance, I leaped to my feet, softly crossed to the door and peered through the crack.

At the sight that met my horrified eyes the hair stood out at the back of my neck as though pulled. There in the centre of the big, brightly lighted room, down on his knees, knife arm outstretched, rocking sideways from his awful belly up, and that hollow laugh coming from his deathly head, was the human spider, Wharton. Six feet in front of him, rearing up from the floor to a good three feet, its flat, evil head swaying from side to side in time with the man, black forked tongue darting out, beady eyes fixed and hissing venomously, was a loathsome cobra. Sick with disgust, I nevertheless stared as if frozen to the door.

A moment and I gasped. *Wharton was edging up! As he*

*swayed he was nearing the reptile! The man was even madder than I had thought. Inch by inch, closer. Five feet. Four feet. Surely he'd stop now! At three feet the reptile would strike! No! Closer. Three feet. Still the snake did not strike. Two and a half feet. Two feet. Wharton's face swayed two feet in front of the most poisonous of all snakes! This was suicide. A cobra bite on the face is the end! I thought of my pistol.*

The thought fled; amazement routed it. Before me in that room I was witnessing a miracle. Wharton's face was no nearer the snake, just two feet, but not because Wharton had stopped his forward creeping. *The cobra was backing up! Back, back he edged, swaying, swaying, hissing, the hideous spider-man following. Back, back. I was watching a sight seldom before witnessed by a human being. The cobra was hypnotized. Wharton was instructing one of his children!*

Back, back. Wharton's eyes came into my view. They seemed to be spinning, whirling like tiny black tops. Back. The sweat poured from my armpits. Back. They were nearing the wall. Wharton's out-thrust knife-hand was but two inches from the serpent's throat. Back. Surely at the wall the snake would strike! Back. Six inches, three inches, an inch. The snake was at the wall and had not struck! The knife drew nearer. I saw it touch the throat.

The rest happened quickly. With a fiendish crow of delight Wharton plunged the knife into the reptile's throat, pinning the writhing, twisting, hissing horror to the wall. Positively nauseated, I turned from the door. Wharton had 'chastised' one of his children.

Wearily climbing back into bed, I heartily hoped that I had witnessed the last act of the night's gruesome entertainment; and for a matter of minutes—perhaps thirty—it seemed that I had. All noises had ceased in the other room and the luminous crack had blinked out of being. I had fallen into a sound but wary sleep.

Suddenly, though, I was torn into complete wakefulness. Stabbing through the silent night had come the sharp, falsetto shriek of a human being. Again it cut the stillness. It was not

a strangled deathcry, it was the cry of insane fear. I swore impatiently. 'A coolie woman, probably,' I decided, 'waking in the night to find her man knifed beside her.' Turning on my side, I determined to ignore it, whatever it was.

But I was not permitted to. The cries continued and seemed to be nearing the house. They had taken on a sobbing note. As they neared, the added noise of approaching voices joined them; low, excited voices jabbering in Malay. I rose from the bed and, slipping into trousers and slippers, crossed to the door. Footsteps sounded on the porch. There was a timid knock on the outer door. I heard Wharton shuffle, growling, across the big room beyond my own, heard him open the porch door.

'What is the meaning of this, you pigs?' he rasped.

A terrified, sobbing voice answered him. I caught enough of the words to know that a boy had been bitten by a snake. Pulling back the bolt, I opened the door and stepped into the room. The room was dark, but I could see the group at the door. The boy's pleading voice came to be more plainly.

'Save Moko, *tuan*!' he was begging in his native tongue. 'Please save Moko! Allah's light upon you, *tuan*; please save Moko!'

'To hell with you!' Wharton barked brutally. 'Getting me out of bed at such an hour! Save yourself! Cut off your hand as I did, you pig! Away with you, you swine, all of you!'

But the terrified native continued to plead. 'No, *tuan*! Please, *tuan*! Moko will turn black and die! Please, *tuan*! Only *tuan besar* can save Moko. It was a cobra king, *tuan*! Moko will turn black and——'

Wharton leaped at the boy's words, pressed the light switch. He was transfigured. His face was pulled into lines of devilish joy. He dragged the boy inside.

'It was what?' he croaked. 'A king? Where? Where? Quick!'

The boy's right hand was wrapped tightly round his left wrist. 'By the pail-house, *tuan*, at the Four Groves! Please, *tuan*, there is great pain——'

But Wharton was not listening. He had sprung to the corner of the room, picked up a ten-foot bamboo pole on the end of

which was a heavy noosed cord, shouting at the same time, 'My pants and boots, one of you swine! Quick!'

They were brought to him. In seconds he had them on. He started for the door. The boy was howling. I stepped forward.

'Just a minute!' I snapped. 'You're surely not leaving that boy to die?'

Wharton wheeled. He hadn't seen me before. He laughed crazily. 'To hell with the boy!' he shouted, and shuffled rapidly out of the room.

I worked swiftly. There should have been serum in the house, but if there was, I didn't know where nor had I time to hunt for it. The venom had been in the boy's hand almost five minutes, and cobra venom often kills in fifteen minutes. Fortunately, though, the boy's other hand clutching his wrist had allowed little of the poison to go into his arm.

Instructing two of the natives to put water on to boil, I fashioned a makeshift tourniquet of my handkerchief and a stick. Bidding the boy retain his grasp on his wrist, I applied it tightly just above. The fangs of the snake had entered on the side of the palm. Looking at the two punctures, I decided that the boy had told the truth as to the snake having been a king cobra. The holes were three inches apart; only a twelve-foot cobra with a giant head could have made them.

With the sharpest blade of my jack-knife I slit the boy's hand, twice at the point of the fang punctures. Two long and deep incisions I made, and the blood spouted out in a small fountain. He howled, of course, but I knew that his one chance for life lay in the drawing of every drop of blood from that hand. When this had been accomplished I removed the tourniquet and bade him plunge his hand into water that was uncomfortably hot and hold it there. His groans were clamorous, but he obeyed me without hesitation.

I finished the treatment with a generous application of iodine procured from a bottle carried in my bag, bound the hand with the cleanest cloths I could find and instructed him to go to bed and stay there quietly for ten hours.

Calling down upon my head the most choice blessings of

Allah, he left and the rest of the natives left with him.

My first-aid work had taken upwards of half an hour and the jabbering group was not yet out of hearing when Wharton returned. The man was beside himself, mumbling and chuckling in feverish excitement. In his right hand he had the bamboo pole and on his left hip the round, small-topped basket. The basket seemed heavy.

Entering the room, he set the basket down and, ignoring me, pulled forth a four-foot-square box from the corner. The box had a hinged lid on the top that fastened with a strong catch. One entire side of it was composed of heavy, finely woven wire netting. He dragged the box to the centre of the room beside the basket, unfastened the catch, pulled the lid a quarter up and held it thus with his foot. Reaching down, he picked up the basket, hoisted it to the box opening, and tilted it. With his knife-hand he prised the basket lid loose and off. Something soft and heavy plopped to the box floor. The lid slammed down, the catch snapped. Wharton sprang back and went to his knees before the wire-netting, laughing insanely.

'Mr. Garr,' he crowed, 'you have brought me luck! Such luck! Come, Mr. Garr, come and look! Come and see my latest, finest, biggest child! The child of my dreams!'

I knew what I would see, but I stepped forward anyhow. It was a cobra, of course, but such a cobra! Truly it was a king. Coiled as it was in the box, its huge, elevated head touching the lid, I could not tell its exact size, but from the thickness of its body, which was as big round as the calf of a man's leg, I knew it to be not under twelve feet. It and the man squatting before it made a sickening sight. A brief glance satisfied me completely.

'Quite a child,' I said, turning away. 'But I hope you're not going to leave it in the house overnight.'

Wharton seemed amazed. 'Not leave it in the house?' he croaked, glaring up at me. 'Put this beauty outside and take a chance of losing it after all these years? By my life, I believe you're insane.'

'Perhaps so,' I countered, chuckling in spite of myself. 'But

it's your child, you know, not mine ; hence my regard for it is not exactly a fatherly one. And look here, if you have instruction and chastisement in mind for your offspring here, put it off till the morning, won't you, and let me get a bit of sleep?"

The spider-man's little black eyes bored coldly into mine as his lips laughed. 'Sleep!' he echoed. 'So you wish to sleep, Mr. Garr? U'm—well, the wishes of a guest are law. You shall not be disturbed again tonight.' And as I moved towards my door, 'Not tonight, Mr. Garr,' he murmured.

And his words, suggestive as they sounded, were literally true, for I entered my room, shed trousers and slippers, climbed into bed and slept without interruption for seven hours.

It was almost ten when I awoke next morning. Leaving my room, I was greeted by a house-boy who waited by a table on which was served a breakfast. The meal was for me, it seemed, by order of *tuan besar*—the great lord. The boxed cobra now occupied a corner of the room.

'Where is *tuan* Wharton?' I asked, as I sat down.

The boy's eyes glanced furtively to right and left as he murmured, 'T'ida taue, *tuan*.' (I know nothing, lord.)

His attitude was again the attitude of those natives of the night before. It irritated me. I said, 'Look here, what are you afraid of, you and the other boys? You all act as though you were about two hops and a gulp ahead of hanging. What's wrong around here, anyway?'

The boy backed off, quaking. He personified utter dread as he murmured again and again: 'T'ida taue, *tuan!* T'ida taue, *tuan!*'

Plainly there was some awful fear hanging over his head and the head of everyone I had met on the place. Obviously, however, there was no information to be gained from him ; so I finished my meal in silence. Afterwards I lighted my pipe, wandered out to the veranda, down and around the house. As I neared the back, a metallic sound came to me, the sound of honing. A moment and I beheld George, the giant negro, sitting in the shade of the house carefully honing a *kris* with a smooth stone.

I greeted him in Malay. He made no verbal answer but, look-

ing up, gave me a grin that brought the corners of his mouth to his ears. It struck me that he was the only human on the plantation outside Wharton who was not infected by the virus of fear. He was even bigger than I had remembered. He was at least six feet five and he must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. There was something humorous in the cheerful grin he threw at me, considering that he was engaged in sharpening what was probably the very weapon he had thrown at my head the night before. I smiled.

'Going to shave someone?' I asked. 'Or perhaps cut their hair?'

His grin couldn't deepen, but it lengthened. He nodded vigorously.

'Fine,' I continued, 'but be careful that the blade doesn't slip. And more slips'—and I tapped my holstered pistol—"and I won't be so forgiving.'

He threw back his head and roared with laughter.

At that moment I saw Wharton. He was crossing from the outbuildings to the house. I hailed him and approached.

'Good morning!' I said briefly. 'If you don't mind I'll start with the books this morning. You haven't yet seen my credentials, and if you—'

'My dear Mr. Garr,' he interrupted testily. 'I told you that you would have to forgo your investigation till the return of my assistant. I am really too busy to—'

'Rats!' I snapped. 'You are the manager! Why should I have to wait for your assistant?'

His lips drew back in a smile that belied the gleam in his eyes. 'Rats, cats, or even snakes,' he retorted. 'You will, nevertheless, wait with your snooping till the return of Jackson.'

He turned on his heel. I laid a restraining hand on his bony arm.

'Just a minute!' I said. 'How does it happen, Wharton, that you refer to your assistant as Jackson when his name is Johnson?'

Snarling, he faced me with a jerk. His knife-arm twisted and drew back. Reaching quickly, I seized it, twisted it and dug it

gently into his belly. There was murder in his tiny, tack-like eyes as they bored into mine. The count of five, though, and he relaxed. His corpse-like face warped into its grin.

'Eh?' he said. 'Oh, Johnson—yes, of course, Johnson. A mere slip of the tongue, Mr. Garr. Johnson, Jackson ; Jackson, Johnson—what's in a name, Mr. Garr?'

Drawing away from me, he glided off, chuckling. Sensing the futility of further argument, I let him go.

Forced to content myself with what I could find out unaided, I spent the rest of the day strolling around the plantation. The seemingly faultless activity about the place surprised me. Natives and coolies, though sullen, uncommunicative and all marked by that puzzling brand of fear, appeared to be doing a full day's work. I could see no single reason for a dropping-off of production.

Towards night, returning to the house through the rapidly falling dusk from an inspection of trees that seemed to be in an excellent state of production, I was softly greeted by a passing native. Looking more closely, I saw that he was the boy who had been snake-bitten. I paused to inquire how he felt. As I expected, he had been quite ill all day but was now considerably better. Examining his hand by the light of a small flashlight I habitually carried, I assured him that he was in no further danger. Though characterized by the furtiveness I was learning to expect, his thanks were profuse and he seemed sincerely grateful to me. It occurred to me that I might gain some information from him.

'Moko,' I inquired in his native dialect, 'are you afraid of something?'

Moko's physical and verbal responses contradicted each other. 'No, tuan,' he answered in a terrified voice.

'Now come, Moko,' I urged gently. 'You're not afraid of me, are you? You know that I'm your friend. I know there's something frightening you ; tell me what it is. Is it tuan Wharton?'

At my words the boy's face changed. Fear was still there, but something else as well—hated. Eyes blazing, he leaned closer to me.

'No, *tuan*,' he whispered hoarsely. 'No! Moko loves *tuan* Wharton! But the big-bellied one, *tuan*, the father of the cobras, he is not *tuan* Wharton! He is Spider Horrosek! Spider Horrosek, *tuan*!'

Spider Horrosek! The name sank into my subconscious mind like a fish-hook dragging up my memory. Spider Horrosek! The gossiping planters on the Batavia steamer! By the gods! That was the name they had spoken! Spider Horrosek, a one-handed madman with unbelievable power over snakes! But Wharton, where was he? And Johnson? Could the fiend have——

I turned to the boy, but he was gone. It was almost dark now. The heavy brooding tropical night seemed to settle around me like a tangible, choking something. Poor Wharton—and Johnson—they were dead without a doubt. That fiend would not....

But wait! Those letters from the plantation had been in Wharton's handwriting. Of course they might have been forged, but . . . well, there was one way to find out; there was one man who knew whether Wharton was dead or alive, and, if alive, where he was—Horrosek! I determined to get the truth from him or cut his foul throat with his filthy knife in the effort.

I found him in the big living-room on his knees before the cage of the king cobra. He had worked the giant reptile into a rage, and was laughing in idiotic glee as it hurled itself futilely against the wire netting.

'Greetings, Mr. Garr!' he called. 'Come, see my big, naughty child. How the loving beauty would delight to kiss me. He is—ah—  
—you seem perturbed about something, Mr. Garr. I hope——'

'Get up!' I rapped. 'Quick, if you don't want to be dragged up.'

He rose. I drew close to him.

'Get this, Mr. Spider Horrosek. I'm on to the game from top to bottom, and I'm giving you just thirty seconds to answer one question; thirty seconds, and if you don't come clean I give you my word I'll rip your skinny throat from ear to ear with that nasty toad-sticker on the end of your arm. Start talking! Where is Wharton?'

The creature's pasty face darkened. The blazing fury of thwarted madness was in the bared teeth, the black spinning eyes. He must have thrown the whole power of his will into that crazed hypnotic stare, for, meeting it, I was conscious of a strange and subtle tugging at the roots of my faculties. Whatever his powers, though, they were insufficient, and to demonstrate the fact, I seized his knife-arm, bent it and brought the knife to his throat.

'Where is Wharton?' I repeated.

With an obvious effort he pulled himself together. His eyes dropped. He laughed his low, inhuman laugh.

'So I am, one might say, caught up with, Mr. Garr,' he murmured. 'Well, I suspect I delayed your demise a mite too long. A pity! But—with a sigh—'the game is to him who plays and wins, eh, Mr. Garr? If you will release me I will conduct you to Mr. Wharton, who yet was alive and in fair health this morning.'

'Walk!' I said, drawing my pistol and thrusting it into his back. 'And no tricks!'

Out of the house we marched, to the main latex shed. Inside the door, Horrosek, without instruction, pushed a light switch. the dark room was flooded with blinding light. Across the room we moved—my pistol still in his back—to another door. Again, without bidding, he switched on lights. Through that door and to another door. Opening it, he turned to me. He said:

'The light button of this room is on the far wall, Mr. Garr. Do you dare go into the darkness with me?'

To my eyes, accustomed to the powerful light, the darkness of the room was profound. My reply, however, was to seize his knife-arm above his wrist and push my pistol more firmly into his spine.

'Hop ahead!' I said.

I was totally blind in the blackness of the room. We moved ahead. Three steps, five steps, ten steps. The room must be fifteen steps across, I figured. Twelve steps. Fifteen steps. We should be there. I was about to speak. Then it happened.

As though struck by a bullet, the pistol flew from my hand.

With the force of a leaping tiger, something leaped on my body from above and behind, something massive and alive. At the same instant two arms like elephant trunks wrapped around me. Forward I was hurled. I tensed myself and threw out my arms, expecting to crash into a wall. No. On I went, to a cement floor, along it, tearing the hide from legs, arms and face. As I brought up at last, a heavy door slammed, a bolt shot home. Stunned and bleeding, I heard the throaty, croaking laugh of Spider Horrosek.

"The game is to him who plays and wins, Mr. Garr," he crowed. "I will leave you to the entertainment of my children."

I sat up, rubbing and shaking my head. I strove to clear my senses. Undoubtedly it had been the giant negro, George, who had attacked me, hurling me through a doorway into another room. Probably hanging to a ceiling beam, his eyes accustomed to the darkness, he had watched till I was below him and had leaped on me. But where was I?

Then, sending a cold chill from heels to hair, Horrosek's words came to me. "I will leave you to the entertainment of my children." His 'children'! Snakes! Cobras! I leaped to my feet. Had he thrown me into a den of snakes? The darkness was absolute. I thought of my tiny flashlight. It was a long, round affair, carried as a fountain pen. I drew it forth, praying that it would be unbroken. My prayer was answered. Its white beam cut into the blackness, moved over four planked walls, a heavy door, a planked ceiling and a cement floor. No snakes were visible. I heaved a sigh of relief and switched off the light.

My relief, though, was short-lived. A noise came to me, a sliding noise, close at hand. I heard Horrosek's laugh; it came from beyond the right wall. I pressed the light.

Before my eyes the top plank of the far wall was sliding out of sight to the right. It disappeared into the right wall as I stared; the next one started to slide over, over, over, and disappeared. The blackness of another compartment showed. There had been eight planks. Another one slid away. A new sound, familiar in its dreadfulness, came to me—hissing.

One by one the planks slid out before me as I pressed in

helpless horror against the far left corner. Two planks were left, twelve inches each in width. Gazing over them, I gasped. Ten, fifteen, a score or more of flat, elevated cobra heads stared out at me. Another board went. The last one slid away. Weaponless, helpless, I was locked in a room with a regiment of deadly snakes.

Horrosek's laugh died away. I saw a cobra glide forward—another, another, a dozen, nearer. I held my breath. Ten feet in front of me they stopped, loathsome heads held high, staring, staring with their beady, unblinking eyes. It struck me that the light was attracting them. Should I put it out? I shuddered at the thought. Anything was better than the uncertainty of darkness.

Experimenting, I moved the light. The flat, cruel heads followed it. Good! They saw only the light and not me behind it. Perhaps I. . . .

I stopped. A tapping had sounded on the plank wall which my left hand was pressing. I tapped back. The flat heads turned slightly at the sound. A voice, sounding weak, came to me through the wall. 'Hello, over there!'

It was taking a chance to call back, but I did. A nervous swaying and hissing of the watchful reptiles followed. Then the voice questioned, 'Who are you?'

'Peter Garr, of Singapore,' I responded. 'And you?'

'Wharton,' came the answer.

'Wharton!' Wharton was really alive, a prisoner next door to me. Again his voice sounded.

'Has he put the snakes on you?'

'Yes,' I answered.

I heard a faint 'Damn!' and 'Listen! The top plank of the wall here. Can you reach it?'

I tried. 'Yes,' I called.

'Good. Feel at the top. There's a bit of an opening. If you can get your fingers in, you may be able to pull it loose. I can't help; I'm all in.'

I stretched. I am over six feet tall, with a long reach, and I could just make it. I felt the opening, a crack of little more than a half-inch where the board didn't quite meet the ceiling. My

hopes fell. How could I get my big fingers into that narrow slot?

My movements had aroused the snakes. Hissing, they had inched a foot nearer. Desperation seized me. I must get my fingers in that crack, even though I ripped the flesh to the bone. But wait; first I had better. . . .

Bending, I lowered the light to the floor. The beady eyes followed it. Giving it a sharp push, it rolled away from me, clear to the other corner of the room. The snakes followed, gliding after it. It had been taking an awful chance. Had it swerved and the beam turned on me. . . .

Again I reached for the ceiling, felt along the crack. I found a spot two feet from the front wall where my middle finger went in to the first joint. With all the power I could muster, I pushed in. The wood bit into the flesh. Harder. My fingers sank in to the second knuckle. But it was a two-inch plank. Sweating, the pain sickening my stomach, I worked my hand and pushed in desperately. In—in. With a sudden give, my knuckles slipped through.

I bent them and tugged. It was like pulling on solid steel. The plank was held at the end by a heavy, built-out wooden slot. I glanced round at the cobras. My unavoidable noise was drawing them. Tongues darting, they were leaving the light and nearing me. Madly I tugged, but my stretched position gave me no leverage. I knew, abruptly, that I could never pull that plank loose with one hand. I reached up with the other. Clamping my jaw, I pushed the fingers into the crack. It was agony. The opening was narrower here. In—in—in. I almost fainted as the flesh gave and my fingers slipped through.

I climbed the wall, braced my feet against it and threw every ounce of strength into one tug. There was a splintering rip. The heavy slot at the end of the plank gave. The plank came out six inches. From the corner of my eye I saw several cobras leave the field of light and enter the darkness beneath me. Pulling my left hand free, I shoved it under the board and through into the other room, straining frantically at the plank with my right hand. A splintering roar, and it came loose 'n over my head, and fell to the floor with a crash. With a speed born

of cold terror, imagination plunging dozens of venom-dripping cobra fangs into me, I scrambled up, through the opening, and dropped to the floor on the other side more exhausted than I had ever been before in my life.

It was minutes before I spoke. When I did I told Wharton immediately who I was officially and the purpose of my visit to the plantation. He responded with a recital of what had occurred to him.

Spider Horrosek, it seemed, and the big negro, George, had drifted into the plantation one night about two months before. That was in the rainy season and they had been hungry and without shelter and Wharton had housed and fed them for days. The utter isolation of the plantation must have given Horrosek his idea.

The spider-man had begun by killing Johnson, the assistant. 'Poor devil!' Wharton said. 'Locked him in that same room you were in with half a dozen cobras he'd caught. Must have had a fearful death.' Next, Horrosek, with the aid of the negro, had lured Wharton to the cell we now occupied, locked him in and, instilling the fear of death into natives and coolies by killing a few of them in horrible ways, had taken possession of the place.

'He has me damn' near starved to death,' Wharton continued, 'but he keeps me alive to write letters that will cover things at headquarters. He's absolutely mad, of course, but he had a damned clever and definite scheme. By diverting just half the production for two months or so, he could keep clear of investigation; then, when things would begin to look shady, he could finish me, take the proceeds of full production for about a month and make a clean getaway. Clever, eh?'

I agreed. 'And it rather looks,' I added gloomily, 'as if his clever scheme is going to work beautifully—as far as we're concerned.'

Wharton sighed. 'Yes, we're here to stay until he comes for us. I can tell you that. I've gone over the place thousands of times since I've been here and there's no way out—except into the cobra den. The floors are cement and the walls and ceiling are two-inch planks. I tried for a long time to break through

the wall ahead of you because the good old outdoors is on the other side of it, but. . . .'

His weak voice trailed off on a discouraged note. I could not see him, of course, but he sounded pretty far gone. And it was small wonder, considering that he had been in that awful hole for two months.

For what seemed like hours we sat on the floor of that black room in morose silence. My hands gave me excruciating pain and my mind dwelt on the dark certainty that Horrosek would kill us both when he discovered me here. It was horrible to die like rats cooped up in a trap. Surely there must be some scheme, some trick that would. . . .

Abruptly and for little reason, a face flashed into my memory; Shifty Morgan, a professional American bum and once a good friend of mine. Words he had spoken to me shot through my mind.

'They kin never hold me in them little places, Pete, ol' boy, 'cause there never was a one-storey jail didn't have the same weakness. They makes the floor of thick cement and the walls of thicker cement an' then the fools never hardly more than sets the roof on. Just git your shoulder under it an' push and it'll lift every time.'

I slapped my thigh and leapt to my feet. 'Wharton,' I said, 'did you make this building?'

'Uh? Sure; that is, I superintended the building of it.'

'How is the roof fastened on?'

'Roof? Why—well, how are roofs usually fastened on?'

'I thought so! Listen! Is there a box in this cell, or something I could stand on, something strong?'

'Sure, there's a box in the corner over there. The Spider gave it to me to set my grub on. It's pretty strong, I guess. What are you going to do with it?'

I didn't answer. Groping my way to the corner, I found the box, carried it to the far wall, stood on it, put my shoulder to the ceiling and pushed. I could have shouted aloud. Good old Shifty Morgan had been right! The roof had given slightly.

Setting my feet more firmly I heaved again with more power.

The complaining squawk of yielding nails brought Wharton to his feet. Three of the four roof planks were two inches up from the wall. I could see stars through the opening. Once more I heaved. The roof was lined with tin sheeting and it tore loose with a metallic screech. I would have to hurry. That din would rouse the dead.

Again I lifted. With a crash three roof boards tore free of the wall. I shoved them clear, pulled myself up, tossed my right leg over and turned to reach for Wharton. I froze.

From below me to my right had come a low, heavy chuckle. I twisted. There, ten feet out from the building, looming black and enormous in the moonlight, stood the negro, George. He had a belt over his loin-cloth. In it was a glittering *kris* and a pistol—my own pistol. As I looked, he loosened the belt, removed it and threw it with the *kris* and pistol twenty feet to his rear. Crouching like a great ape, he shuffled slowly forward, laughing gleefully as he moved.

'Come down, *tuan*,' he said in thick Malay. 'Come down so that George, with his two hands, may tear the flesh from your bones in strips.'

It was the end, I thought. I could fight a *man*. I was big: but this was not a man, it was a gorilla! I was a slender fly-weight beside him, despite my one hundred and eighty pounds. Well, it would be better than an unclean death from cobra venom, and maybe. . . .

Suddenly flinging my left leg clear, I sprang.

I landed a foot in front of him and slightly to the right. With the momentum of my leap and all my own strength behind it, I gave him my right full in the middle. I have watched hard, two-hundred pound men fall as though shot from a less powerful blow. The black merely paused and continued chuckling. His belly was like concrete. Arms out, hands open, he came forward. I backed a pace, my left shot out, met his jaw. He shook his head, as if brushing off a fly. On he came, crouching, weaving. He was wide open. Backing, I shot punches at him, hard punches. My torn hands spattered blood on him. He only laughed and moved forward, massive arms clutching and tense.

I was two feet from the wall. I must keep those hands off me at all costs!

I put a terrific right to his stomach. The blow was deliberately low. I was fighting for my life. It brought a grunt from him, a chuckling grunt. Suddenly he sprang. I leapt to the left. One of his hands struck my shoulder, closed on it. Desperately I twisted and jerked, tore loose, leaving half my coat in his grip. I sprang behind him, whipped a smashing blow into his kidneys. He wheeled. I could not wipe out that chuckle!

Again he came for me, more swiftly now and closer to the ground. He was harder to hit. Twice my left hand landed on his cast-iron skull. Numbing pain shot up my arm. Back, back—the chuckling African animal after me. I had hit him dozens of times with blows of murderous power and he was only amused. Back! My arms were beginning to tire. My left hand felt dead. Circling, I tried to back to the *kris* and the pistol. He sensed my purpose, charged and drove me to the side and around. Back. Again I was bearing the wall. Breathing was becoming difficult. Sweat poured from my brow into my eyes. I raised my hand to wipe it away.

At that moment he leaped again, head-on this time, crooked arms stretched wide. I ducked, sprang back and off, struck the wall. A clutching hand found my chest, hooked in my clothes. I wrenched and twisted. The clothes held. With a sickening sweep I was pulled over and in. A great black arm wrapped round me, crushing me against his stinking, greasy chest. A hand like a vice seized my shoulder, tightened on it. Madly I struggled, striking wildly at the giant body. The arms around me pressed tighter, ever tighter; the hand on my shoulder sank deeper. The unending chuckle went on and on. He would rip me limb from limb and laugh while doing it!

Hot steel rods stabbed into my shoulder. My ribs were burning spikes being driven through my back. A roaring began in my ears. Red haze blinded me. I felt myself being lifted from the ground. My legs flew back. I kicked out crazily, felt my big boots strike flesh and bone. Vaguely I heard a howl. The pressure on chest and shoulder released abruptly. I fell back

against the wall. A moment and my head cleared slightly. I looked ahead.

Four feet in front of me I dimly saw the negro. His grin and chuckle were gone. Lips drawn ferociously from his teeth, he was scowling at me, as, bent double, he rubbed his legs. *I had kicked his shins. He was not completely invulnerable, then!*

The thought braced me. Perhaps the brute had other more vital weaknesses. Positive of death, I had been fighting with helpless desperation, without thought; now I drew great breaths of air into my lungs, worked my numbed shoulder and arm. Ideas flashed through my rapidly clearing brain. Where could I possibly hurt the giant? His chin and body were iron; I would only break my hands on them. Kicking his shins would but delay my end. I could reach his throat easily enough, but his neck was too. . . .

His neck! The back of his neck! I could hear Sawtell's voice (Sawtell, Princeton wrestling coach and ju-jitsu exponent extraordinary): 'But only in a pinch, Garr, because, if it is properly delivered, the neck must break!' The rabbit, the ju-jitsu rabbit blow!

Head down, snarling like an enraged baboon, the big black charged. His laugh gone now, he meant to finish me quickly. But my fifteen-second breather had cleared my head. I waited a split second, dropped to a squat, shot up sideways, twisting at the waist, my right hand raised and opened. He hit the wall where I had stood. The back of his lowered neck was beneath me. Now! With a swishing, axe-like stroke I brought the side of my open hand down on his neck where it joined his head. There was a snapping sound. I leaped back. The blow had nearly broken my own wrist. A moment and to my horror the negro straightened! Good God! If that hadn't hurt him, I was . . . I stared.

With a ghastly, surprised grin on his face the black man had turned to me. He was swaying. His massive head was lolling sideways on his shoulder. He seemed to be trying to straighten it. The truth swept over me; *his neck was broken!*

I saw his eyes glaze in the moonlight. A last, gurgling chuckle came from his loose lips. His legs buckled. Like a great side of beef he pitched forward to the ground—dead. I mutely thanked God.

I was badly in need of a rest. I felt nauseated and weak; my body was one great ache. With Horrosek still to be accounted for, though, there was no time for sick leave. My first move was to gain possession of the *kris* and pistol. The gun in its holster, I dragged myself to the shed roof and spoke to Wharton. The poor fellow had lain in his prison helpless during my scuffle. It was a job to pull him up and out, for he was almost entirely without strength and I felt as weak as the proverbial kitten. I managed it finally, however, handed him the *kris*, and we started for the house. I assumed that Horrosek had entire confidence in his giant black and would not be expecting us. I was right.

Nearing the house, I saw the spider-man standing idly in front of the veranda. At the same moment he saw Wharton and me, stared, turned, scuttled up the veranda steps and into the house. I heard the door bolt rattle home.

A moment before that, though, something else happened. We were approaching the house from the side. As Horrosek entered the front door opening on to the large living-room I saw a dark, briefly clad figure slip from the rear living-room window. The window closed a moment before the front-door bolt sounded. The figure remained at the window, seemingly peering into the room.

Wharton and I made for the front door. We were perhaps twenty seconds in getting there. I pounded on the door.

'The jig's up, Horrosek,' I called. 'Better come peaceable or you'll come dead!'

There was no response. I was about to speak again when Horrosek's low, croaking laugh came to me. It was horribly reminiscent of that 'instructing and chastising' performance I had witnessed. I called once more. That laugh was the only response. It was growing louder. I hammered on the door. The laugh continued—louder. What could the crazy devil be up to?

now. Wharton suggested that we go to the rear window, cover him with the pistol there and force him out.

At the rear window we found a native boy, the boy I had seen crawling away. It was Moko, the lad who had been snake-bitten. Ordering him away, I drew my pistol and stepped up to the window. I stiffened in horror.

Facing me, Horrosek was down on his knees ten feet from the far wall. Laughing his insane laugh, he was swaying from side to side. Four feet in front of him, directly between me and him, its flat, hooded head elevated five feet and swaying regularly with him, was the giant king cobra. I knew instantly that the boy, Moko, had released the snake from its cage.

For minutes I watched. I was expecting to see the snake backing towards me and I was waiting for a chance to shoot it without hitting Horrosek. The spider-man's laugh continued to grow in volume. Suddenly then cold sweat broke out on me. The cobra was not backing. Horrosek was backing!—slowly, slowly, *inch by inch to the wall!* The cobra, swaying, hissing, was edging forward!

The spider-man had been ten feet from the wall. Now he was only five!—and laughing, louder, louder. His laugh was becoming a scream. Four feet from the wall! I was helpless. I could not shoot the snake without shooting Horrosek. Closer. Three feet. Two feet. I could see those tiny black eyes—spinning—but now with the terror of a damned soul in them. Closer. One foot. Closer. *Horrosek was against the wall!* He shrieked.

I shall never forget the rest. Sometimes at night I awoke sweating with that hellish shriek in my ears—and with the awful vision before me of that monstrous king cobra striking, striking, striking at Spider Horrosek's deathly head. Three times it sank its poisonous fangs into his face—and a cobra bite on the face is the end. One cannot use a tourniquet on a man's neck, you know.

There was but one humane thing to be done, and though I couldn't do it myself, I did the next best thing. I loaned my

pistol to Moko, the native boy, who had not obeyed my orders about leaving.

'The *tuan* first, Moko,' I suggested.

That my suggestion was superfluous was demonstrated by the eagerness with which the grinning little devil seized my pistol.

# THE GIRDLE

JOSEPH McCORD

THE pool of mottled light on the table-top had drifted over to where Sir John's clawlike fingers, emerging from the silk sleeve of his dressing robe, drummed slowly on the black oak.

Carson, erect on the hearth rug, had ignored the chair indicated by the fingers and was filled with a sudden resentment as he sensed the indifferent weariness of the tapping. And this old man was Pelham's father! It was all so different from what he had expected. There was no fathoming the expression of that mask-like face with the impenetrable stare, settled in the cushioned depths of the wheel chair.

The heels of Carson's boots came together with a suggestion of military stiffness and he spoke curtly: 'I confess, I don't understand.'

And his host replied in a curiously dry voice, 'Perhaps it is not altogether necessary that you should.'

The words carried a studied courtesy, but their veiled irony was not lost on the officer.

'Granted. But Pelham was my friend—if he was your son—and I am here only because he asked—'

'Of course,' interrupted Sir John. 'Spare me the formula, if you will. He's dead. It was arranged that you should come here and tell me how well he died. He was to perform the same service for you, no doubt, had the circumstances been reversed. The Pelhams always die well. It is in the breed. If you insist, however—'

Carson choked back his resentment. 'There were circumstances that make it seem necessary—and yet—'

'Pray get on.'

'Then I'll make it short.' Carson advanced a little nearer the table. 'It was in a little hut I last saw him—alive. Enemy ground newly occupied, it was, and here was this hut in a small clearing. It might have been a woodcutter's hut and it was empty save for some heavier furniture. Several of us were poking about its one room, then Pel started up a crazy ladder at one end leading to a small loft. I heard him moving around and scratching matches, then he was quiet. I walked over near the ladder and hailed him.'

"Nothing up here but an old chest," he came back, "and empty at that." Then I heard him laugh. "Somebody left me a Dutch Sam Browne—thought the cursed thing was a snake—felt cold."

'I heard the lid of the chest fall, then Pel started down into the room. Part-way, he turned and faced me. He had the end of a belt in each hand, holding it behind him as if he were going to wear it. I didn't notice that, though. All I saw was his face—the way he looked.'

'The way he looked,' prompted Sir John, as the younger man stared at him soberly. 'And, pray, how did he look?'

Carson seemed to pull himself together with an effort. 'That's exactly what I have to tell you. I'll try to.' He seated himself on the edge of the table, one booted foot swinging nervously. 'Why—it was in his eyes, I think—yes, that's what it was. There was something in them that shouldn't ever be in a man's eyes. You've seen a dog that was vicious and a coward—all at the same time. He wants to go at your throat, and something holds him for the moment.' He drew a long breath. 'It was like that,' he decided.

Sir John was watching one of his visitor's hands; it had gripped the edge of the table and the knuckles were white. The boot was motionless, tense.

'As you say—like a dog. Well?'

At the quiet words, the younger man relaxed. 'Yes, sir,' he

said gratefully. Then, 'I spoke to him and he never answered. He came on down the ladder slowly—still facing us. The others were drawing up behind me—I could feel them. We all watched Pel. It wasn't that he just moved slowly, either—it was something different. Slinking! I think that's the way to say it. And he watched us—never blinking. No one said a word.

'When Pel's feet hit the floor, he began moving towards the door—it had come shut. He backed to it and began feeling for the latch with one hand, holding the belt all the time. He kicked the door open with his heel.

'Then I knew that we were losing him—if you can understand what I mean—knew he'd got to be saved—from something!'

Carson's voice was curiously strained. 'I wanted to stop him—I tell you I did want to! I tried. I started for him—'

'And the belt?' interposed Sir John, quietly.

'The belt?' echoed the other man dully. 'Oh, yes. He held it all the while—I just told you that.'

'But he escaped.'

'He did. I had scarcely moved. He gave a dreadful sort of cry and leaped out of the doorway—backward. We rushed it then. But he had made the trees and we could hear him crashing through the undergrowth as though there hadn't been a Boche within a hundred miles of us. That's how he went.'

The heavy silence that followed was broken only by a coal falling in the grate. With a long sigh, Carson raised his head. He fumbled a packet of cigarettes, thrust one between his lips, but made no move to light it.

'I am waiting,' came the voice from the chair.

'Waiting?'

'Come, come! You tell me my son is dead. If I recollect, you mentioned gallantry. So far you have suggested desertion. The details.'

'Oh, yes. The details. But you won't believe them. One would have to have seen—'

'Have the kindness.' Sir John leaned back wearily among his cushions and closed his eyes.

'Well—it was the third evening after that—I think it was the

third. There had been an advance, a lot of machine-gun work. It was growing dark, I remember. Harvey, my sergeant, came up and asked if he could speak with me. "I've seen Lieutenant Pelham," he whispered queerly.

"He's dead," I said. I knew he was dead.

"Yes, he's dead, sir," says Harvey, "but there's something queer about him. Will you have a look?"

"He led the way and I followed."

Carson's voice was becoming strained again. Sir John leaned forward and stared steadily into his eyes.

"We came to a little open place. There was some light there—enough to see the dreadfiest group God ever bunched in one place! First of all I saw Pel—sitting with his back to a little tree, chin on his knees. He was staring straight to the front—dead. But around him! Five German infantrymen—dead too. Dragged into a sort of semi-circle. And they weren't shot and they weren't gassed—nothing like that. Every one had his throat torn! Torn!"

Carson leaned close to the old man, his voice shrilled as he demanded almost piteously, "You hear me, can't you?"

"They would be—torn," said Sir John Pelham, very quietly. "Finish your story."

The officer pulled himself together with an effort. "It makes it easier, having you understand. I've seen men—"

He thrust the fingers of one hand into the collar of his tunic as though it choked him. "I've seen men, sir, meet death in a thousand ways, but not—not that way! And Pel wasn't marked at all—I looked!"

The father leaned forward in his chair, but the gesture of interest was not reflected in his impassive face.

"What of the belt?"

"He wasn't wearing it, but the thing was there—lying at his feet. And it was coiled!"

"Show it to me."

"Why, I—yes, I took it. I don't know why. I dropped it into my kitbag—next day I got mine. I'm just out of the hospital by a month. Otherwise I'd have been here sooner."

With an unexpected clutch at the wheels of his chair, Sir John was close to the table, white hand extended.

'Give it to me.'

An instant's hesitation, then Carson slowly pulled a paper-wrapped object from his pocket, laid it easily on the table.

'It's in there,' he muttered. 'I don't like the damned thing.'

With deft fingers the baronet loosened the paper, shook the contents on the table.

There lay the leather belt, coiled compactly. In the waning light it was of a pale brown colour, thin and very flexible. On the other end was a metal clasp, its surface cut with marks that might or might not have been characters. There was a reading lens near by, and Sir John used it to study the coiled strap. He examined it grimly from many angles, without once touching it. Finished, he leaned back in his chair and thoughtfully tapped the palm of his hand with the lens.

'Captain Carson!'

'Sir!'

'Attend most carefully to what I have to say—follow my instructions exactly. Take that belt in one hand only. Carry it to the hearth—lay it directly on the coals. When it is burned, quite burned, you may tell me.'

Carson got slowly to his feet. With a hand that hesitated and was none too steady, he reached for the coiled belt, lifted it a few inches from the table. At his touch, seemingly, the coil loosened; it started to unroll. He caught at it with both hands.

For a fraction of a second his body seemed caught in a strained tension. Then he began backing away from the table, noiselessly, furtively. With an end of the belt in each hand, he shifted his eyes to Sir John and they glowed with a strange, sinister light. From his sagging jaws came his tongue, licking.

Screaming an oath, Sir John Pelham flung the reading lens with all his frail strength full into that distorted face.

'Drop it!' he bawled savagely. 'Jarvis!'

At the call, an elderly man-servant came hurrying. He saw his master supporting himself on the arms of the chair, trembling with the exertion, and staring curiously at the uniformed

visitor. Carson was swaying unsteadily, one hand pressed against his face, blood trickling from between his fingers. At his feet lay the belt and the shattered lens. Jarvis saw all this and took his post near Sir John, waiting his orders.

'Jarvis!'

'Yes, sir,' said the man-servant evenly.

Sir John sank back wearily. 'The tongs, Jarvis. Fetch the tongs. Pick up that strap. Only the tongs, mind you—don't touch it with your hands. So. . . . Now lay it on the coals. . . . hold it down hard.'

The three watched the burning in deep silence, watched the belt writhe and twist in the heat, scorch with flame, fall in charred fragments.

'Jarvis!'

'Yes, sir?'

'Lights, then brandy for our guest. You may bring things and patch that cut for him.' To Carson, 'Sit down, man, and pull yourself together. I regret I was obliged to strike you, but in the circumstances you will agree that it was quite necessary, I think.'

'I don't understand,' muttered Carson dully. He slumped weakly into a nearby chair. 'I'm—I felt—I don't know.' His voice trailed off; his chin sagged on his breast.

'You don't wish to eat, by any chance?'

'What made you ask that? God, no! I couldn't eat—I only—'

But Jarvis was offering him the brandy.

'None for me,' said Sir John shortly. 'But you may help me over to the far cases—I am looking for a book.'

In a few moments Jarvis had wheeled him back to the table and he was turning the pages of a small book he had found. It was bound in vellum and bore evidence of great age. Carson shiveringly helped himself to another drink as his host turned the crackling pages till he found what he sought. Tracing the lines with a lean forefinger, he read silently for a moment, then looked shrewdly at his guest.

'This may interest you, Captain. Read here'—and he indicated the place.

Carson slowly deciphered the strange script of the hand-written page.

'Another means wherethrough men have become were-wolves is that they in som maniere gotten a belt or girdel maked of human skin. By an autentyke cronicle a yoman hadde such a girdel which he kept locken in a cheste secretly. It so felle on a day that he let the cheste unlocken and his litel sone getteth the girdel and girteth his middel with it. In a minute the childe was transmewed into a merviliously wilde beste but the yoman fortuned to enter the house and with sped he remewed the girdel and so cured his sone who sayde he remembered naught save a raving apeptyt.'

The book slipped from Carson's nerveless hands. Wide-eyed, he stared into Sir John's impassive face.

When he could find the words: 'God! You have meant—you couldn't mean——'

'I was in hopes,' mused the old man. 'You know, I was quite in hopes you would feel hungry.'

# BEHIND THE BLINDS

FLAVIA RICHARDSON

JOAN MORGAN sat at the bed-sitting room window and looked across the intervening backyards to the row of windows facing her. The backs of Elvaston Road were fascinating though she never quite knew why. Elvaston Road itself was a long street of large houses, now too big to be kept up in their entirety by the families that had formerly occupied them from attic to cellar. Most of them were private hotels; the one immediately opposite Joan's window had been divided into self-contained suites euphemistically called flats by the house-agent—in other words, 'a family to every floor'.

The second floor back had new tenants. Presumably they inhabited the second floor front also, but the passion for economy of space always made it possible for the flats to be divided once again into flatlets or 'American flats', the distinction of which seemed to be that the bed retreated into an alcove and hid there. Joan's own room had no alcove and was therefore merely a 'sunny bed-sitting room with own gas-ring and use of bath'.

The new second floor tenants had evidently just moved in. Their lace curtains were new and hung stiffly in ungainly folds as though they had not quite recovered from being packed. Joan watched idly, chiefly because she had nothing better to do and because it was always amusing to see new people and their belongings.

Suddenly she stiffened, gasped and instinctively put her hand on the window-sill for support. Yet nothing strange had hap-

pened. Only at the second floor window, the left-hand one next door to the private hotel, had appeared a face—a face so redolent with evil, so utterly wicked with the refinements of knowledge, that it made her sick and terrified even to look at it. It was a woman—a woman who had once been handsome, perhaps beautiful, yet now every feature was a bestial travesty of what it had been in its prime. The hair was plentifully streaked with grey, the neck was wrinkled and sagging, but the eyes were alive with ferocity and hate.

Joan shrank back as if she could be seen and harmed even from such a distance. For a moment the face looked out of the window. Then a hand remarkably beautiful and slender came up and pulled down the blind. For a moment the shadow lingered, then it disappeared, and the room was once more masked by an oblong of light.

Joan shook herself and tried to throw off the uncomfortable feeling that assailed her. She got her supper mechanically and found herself furtively looking from time to time out of the window, wondering if she would see that terrible face again. Nothing of the sort occurred. When she went to bed, the light behind the blind had already been put out. When she got up in the morning the blind itself had been raised and the window was masked with the curtains.

That evening Joan found herself hurrying home from the office. She did not know what made her almost run from the bus, but a little later on she found herself almost without distinct volition, sitting at the window waiting to see what would happen. The same thing took place. Again came that horrible feeling of terror, almost of paralysing sickness; again came the sight of the grey-haired woman and the opening of the window before the drawing-down of the blind.

Impelled by what force she did not know, Joan watched the same procedure night after night for a week. Then one evening she felt a strange urge. Instead of getting off the bus at the usual place and hurrying home, she went on a little further and walked down Elvaston Road. She thought she knew the house by sight, but she found it more difficult to trace than she had

expected. The fronts were all so different from the backs, and, at the same time, it seemed impossible to count the numbers accurately. Baffled, she gave up the attempt and went home, looking at her watch as she did so. She reckoned that she would be too late for the episode of the blind.

Yet, almost as if it had been arranged specifically for her benefit, the same ritual took place just after her return to her room. This time it seemed to Joan that the woman smiled at her—an evil, horrible smile that yet held in it something of a lure.

Two nights later Joan found herself counting the backs of the houses, leaning out of the window to be accurate. She must know what the front of the house looked like. On the third day she went once more down Elvaston Road and checked the numbers till she came to the one she sought. Like the others, it was uninteresting, lacking in paint, with the stucco peeling away in small patches from the portico, and the five steps leading to the front door in need of overhauling.

Joan slipped furtively up the steps and looked at the little brass plates by the bells. Some of the occupants had not risen to the dignity or expense of brass, but had been content with visiting cards or pieces of paper with names printed on them more or less efficiently. But the second floor bell remained untouched, unlabelled save for the distinguishing figure so thoughtfully supplied by the landlord. Thus there was no clue.

A door opened somewhere upstairs. Joan heard the sound of a light tread. It filled her with sudden unreasoning panic. She fled down the steps and as she hurried up the road it seemed to her that she heard the horrible throaty chuckle of a woman at her heels.

For several days after that she gave Elvaston Road a wide berth, even going out of her way to avoid passing down it on her return from a shopping expedition. Yet every night found her at the window awaiting for the ritual of the blind—and every night it came.

Then Fate took a hand and plunged her into the midst of things where she would never have gone in any other way.

'You live quite close to Elvaston Road, don't you, Miss

Morgan?' her chief asked one morning when he had finished dictating letters.

'Yes,' Joan said, her heart beating unaccountably fast.

'I wonder if you would do me a favour on your way home tonight? Leave this parcel for me at number thirty-two. It's a rather valuable glass vase that I'm sending to an old friend of mine who is a bit of an expert. There's a discussion about the actual value and I don't like to trust it through the post, even if it is well packed.'

'Of course.' Joan spoke as quietly as she could.

'That's awfully good of you. I'll have it made into a parcel and if you would come in and fetch it before you go, I'd be glad. There is no need to wait. My friend will arrange to get it back to me in a day or two and he has promised to have someone in the flat to take it in.'

Thirty-two Elvaston Road. The number hummed in Joan's head all day. Was that the number of the mysterious house? She could not remember. How did the numbers run in Elvaston Road? Were they odd and even on either side, or did they run straight up one side and down the other? Curiously enough, no amount of concentration could bring to her mind the number of the one house that mattered; she could not even remember any particular house from which she might have counted.

The night was warm and mild for spring. The bulbs in the park were in flower, the young leaves on the trees had done more than just show in bud. The early daffodils showed touches of yellow where they were about to break their green sheaths. The earth seemed cool and fresh and friendly. It was with some reluctance that Joan Morgan got down from the bus and went along Elvaston Road. For a moment she even hesitated—wondered if she should go back to her room and spend sixpence on bribing the landlady's little boy to deliver the parcel. Then she shook her head. The vase was valuable—suppose that any harm came to it? She could not confess that she had left it to someone else's care.

Down Elvaston Road she walked, scanning the numbers with a growing anxiety as she got nearer and nearer to the fatal

door. Then her heart gave a great throb and she found herself impelled up those ominous steps. Mechanically she looked at the address on the label. Then her eyes sought the little plates that surmounted each bell. 'A. Craven' lived on the third floor. Joan set her teeth. That meant that she would have to pass the mysterious door to the second floor flat not once but twice. Could she get up and come down again without danger? She shuddered. Some unknown force terrified her. It seemed as though the mouth of the hall were a yawning monster beckoning her to her own destruction, grinning evilly as though aware that she could not refuse.

There was no help for it. Joan threw back her head, gripped the precious parcel more tightly under her arm and started up the stairs. 'Perhaps,' she romanced to herself, 'perhaps Mr. Craven will be just going out. Perhaps we shall go down the stairs together. . . .' And all the time in her heart she knew that this was pure romance, that whatever happened she would have to find her own way through her adventure.

Moved by some curious instinct, Joan tiptoed up the stairs. They were uncarpeted, just covered with worn and thin linoleum, and it seemed that however quietly she walked, every step was like the report of a gun. Yet it would be far worse to come down again—far worse.

As she went by the fatal doorway of the second floor she looked at it, fascinated, furtive. It remained serenely shut—one might have thought that it always remained shut, so quiet was the house. Yet only Joan knew that somehow, somewhere behind that door lurked horror.

The third floor door gave out no such mysterious alarms. It was freshly painted, the knocker and handle were of gleaming brass and the small additional bell at the side was connected with a well-charged battery. Joan pressed it and the 'ping' seemed to echo through the whole of the flat. Almost before she had realized it, the door was opened by an old-fashioned man-servant. He took the parcel from her, bowed his thanks and shut the door as she turned to go downstairs. The whole episode had taken only the fraction of a minute. Joan gasped. She realized

now that she had still gone on romancing, hoping that if Mr. Craven himself were not going out that his man would see her down to the door at the foot of the stairs. Now she must go alone.

Treading on the sides of the stairs, remembering that according to the best detective stories the treads gave less sound at the sides than in the middles, Joan stealthily surmounted the first of the difficulties, the half-way turn. Then disaster overtook her. In her anxiety to creep successfully down the remainder of the steps and along the landing, she slipped, clutched at the banisters, missed them and covered the last of the flight in a recumbent position. And the noise. . . .

Joan picked herself up as quickly as she could, feeling very foolish and remarkably thankful that she had not sprained her ankle. She was just brushing down her skirt when the door of the second floor flat was opened. On the threshold stood the woman of the blind. Her face was showing nothing but kind concern.

'You've had an accident?' she said. 'I heard you slip and was afraid that you had broken a bone.'

'No, thank you,' Joan said, rather flustered. 'It was very silly of me. I must have caught my heel somehow in the linoleum.'

'So uncomfortable and alarming. Won't you come in and rest for a moment or two? I am sure you must be suffering from shock.'

Joan shook her head. 'Really, I assure you it is nothing,' she began, but found herself impelled, almost without her own volition, to step into the second floor flat. The woman closed the door. There was something so alarming and forbidding in the snap of the lock that Joan almost turned and ran—yet she knew by some sixth sense that she would not be allowed to do so.

Again, impelled more by understanding than by spoken word, she went down the narrow little passage to a room at the end—the room with the blind—the second floor back. The door was open. It seemed from the glimpse she caught as she went towards it an ordinary enough room, cheerful and furnished as a

comfortable sitting-room. When she stepped into it she drew back almost with horror.

Sitting in a wheel chair, evidently unable to use his lower limbs, was a man—the largest, fattest, most gross man she had ever seen. He was more than gross, he was horrible. His hair was snow-white, his skin pale and flaccid like that of a person who has not seen enough sun. His hands were fleshy and repulsive, with coarse yellow hairs on the fingers, which themselves were swollen and enlarged till they looked like great white caterpillars. They seemed to writhe, too, like caterpillars. His eyes were very blue and very keen, under the overhanging brows, from which all vestige of eyebrows seemed to have gone.

If this were the woman's husband, Joan felt she could understand the expression of hatred that came over her when she pulled down the blind. To be cooped up with this abnormality . . . yet, was the woman herself more normal? Joan turned to look at her . . . and drew back for a moment, horrified at the expression she caught in the piercing eyes.

'This young lady has slipped on the stairs,' said the woman. 'I brought her in to rest for a moment. I'll make some tea.'

'Do,' said the man. His voice was high-pitched and thin, like the note of a reed instrument. There was something uncanny about this clear, high note coming from that enormous body, sunk deep in the chair.

The woman turned and left the room before Joan could protest. Compelled by the blue eyes, she took a chair, but felt as if she were poised on the edge of a volcano. Nothing happened. No one spoke, yet the stillness and the silence were in themselves alarming. Something was wrong somewhere. Joan was not peculiarly sensitive; she had never considered herself especially subject to atmosphere, but the atmosphere of that flat simply shrieked alarm and fear and horror. She tried to move, but felt as though she were hypnotized.

The kettle must have been on that stove in the kitchen, for scarcely three minutes elapsed before the woman came back with a tray in her hands. Joan watched her with care. She did not want to eat or drink in the strange flat, to which no one

knew she had come. Yet it would be difficult to refuse. At least the tea was in the pot, not in the cups . . . yet . . . she hesitated, but dare not reject the cup that was passed to her first. And the others drank without hesitation.

Nothing happened. The three of them sat there, quite still, and without a word being spoken. Joan suddenly felt that she would become hysterical, that she would laugh or giggle hopelessly. This was so utterly absurd, so unnatural.

'Too fat . . . too fat . . .' the man broke the silence with these strange, irrelevant words. Joan stared at him, wondering what he meant. The woman merely shot him a glance from her bright eyes. She seemed to be quite unconcerned, almost expecting it. . . . Joan grew a little more afraid. At the worst, the pair of them seemed to be dangerous ; at the best they must be lunatics. She made a great effort and rose to her feet.

'Thank you so much for your hospitality,' she said, the words sounding forced and unnatural. 'I must be getting back.'

'Won't you stay a little longer?' said the woman, and as she spoke she also got up. The old man at the same time manipulated the wheelchair so that it was between Joan and the door. She saw the movement with a sinking fear. What did this mean? To get out of the room she would have to push past, to push out of the way that horrible lump of flesh. Apart from the loathsomeness of touching it, she was very doubtful if she would have the necessary strength.

'We shall be delighted to keep you as a guest for a little while.' The woman spoke suavely, but there was a ferocious glint in her eyes. She bent forward and picked up a piece of string from the table. She ran it through her hands, straightening it out, and Joan saw that it was a very fine, strong lasso. The woman moved forward.

Joan dodged behind the table. Yet all the while she knew that this was only a feint to gain a moment—just a moment in which to think of some way of escape. What could she do? The door was barred—she was on the second floor—the window was useless. One quick glance told her it was shut, that before she

could open it and call out on the chance of attracting attention she would be captured.

The old man in the chair was chanting in a soft, high voice that ran up and down two or three notes with monotonous regularity. Joan heard the words, heard them in spite of her fear and horror. Over and over again they came. '... She's too fat... she's too fat...'

Then the woman took a step towards the end of the table. 'This has gone on long enough,' she said, and the evil in her voice and face made Joan feel sick. 'Wilt you come, or shall I take you?'

Desperately Joan turned her head to right and left. Then she saw a small door in the wall. It had been papered uniformly with the rest of the room and had escaped her notice. Whatever might lie behind it, it could not be worse than what was before her eyes. Time—time to think, time to act, was what she must have. She calculated the distance mentally, every sense alert to watch the woman's movements. Then she sprang and caught the handle. If the door were locked. . . .

It yielded to her frantic pulling and she slammed it behind her, panting, sobbing, as she thrust a bolt home, scarcely aware of what she did. She heard a low chuckle from the room she had just left, and then silence.

Joan straightened herself. She was in the other little room at the back of the house. The blind was down and it was almost dark. The window was outlined against the wall. Joan felt her way to it and released the blind, which went up with a snap. Dusk had fallen outside, but there was enough light to distinguish furniture.

The room was furnished meanly with a trundle bed in one corner, a chair and a table, and a combined dressing-table and washstand. In one corner hung a long curtain which bulged out in a curiously solid manner. Originally intended to supply the needs of a wardrobe, it seemed now to be concealing something more than clothes. Joan felt for the electric light, but found no switch. On the washstand she discovered, by feeling, a stump of candle. There were matches in her handbag to

which, by sheer force of habit, she had clung. She struck one and waited. Still no sound from the other side of the door. It was almost as if she had played into their hands. She knew that the bolt would not be much protection. It was a flimsy affair and only fit to hold the door against casual entry. She must find some way of escape quickly.

All at once she became aware that there must be another person in the room. Her sixth sense alarmed her; then she listened, trying to hold her breath, which had been coming in long, noisy gasps. Undoubtedly there was someone else to discover. Joan took up the candle and went to the long curtain, the only possible place of concealment, since the bed was too low for anyone to crawl beneath it. She pulled back the curtain and just restrained a cry as the candle flickered in her shaking hand.

Behind the curtain, gagged and bound and kept in an upright position by an iron ring round her neck that was attached to a staple in the wall, was a girl. She was stark naked and so thin that even in the faint light of the candle Joan could see the bones sticking through the skin.

She unfastened the gag in a minute. The girl gasped, drawing long, panting breaths. She was so weak that she could hardly speak and then only in a whisper. Joan put her ear to her mouth to catch the words.

'Get me away!' That was the first cry. Joan's mouth worked. With all the will in the world, if it were possible.

'Who are you?' she whispered. 'How did you get here? What are they doing to you?'

'My name's Elizabeth Drew. I answered an advertisement for a companion. I've been here weeks, I think. I don't know. They're starving me. . . . He says I'm too fat. . . .'

'He said that when I was there,' Joan said in horror.

'They want you, too. They keep me tied up here and chained to the wall. She feeds me a little every now and then. They'll do the same to you. There was another girl here . . . in the other corner . . . she died. They like two. When I die, they'll get another one for you. . . .'

Joan felt the hair on her neck creeping upright with horror. What was this ghastly flat? Was it all a terrible nightmare?

'But why?' she whispered.

'They're mad, I think. He comes in every day in his chair and feels me with his filthy fat hands. I think I shall go mad, too, if I don't die first. He touches me all over and then says I'm too fat.'

'What about the window? Could I get out?'

'It's barred. I tried once, when I first came. Then she never let me go again. There's no hope. She'll come in presently and he'll come and gloat over me. And they'll tie you up, too, in the other corner and laugh when you ask for food. They say . . . they say slimming is so fashionable now.'

'If I got out, I could bring help,' Joan suggested. 'You can't go by yourself.'

'You'll never get out. He always bars the way with his chair. You can't get past him anyhow. . . .'

Joan felt an unconscionable desire to be sick. Yet she was determined not to be kept in that loathsome place. She had just as much time at her disposal as they chose to give her. With one blow, one real effort, they could force the shaky bolt and then her hope would be gone for ever. She realized that once she was in their hands again she was doomed. Mechanically she walked over to the window. As Elizabeth had said, it was barred. It overlooked her own room . . . she remembered that now. . . . For the moment it had escaped her. Her own room . . . would she ever see it again? One thing she did determine—if she ever got back she would ask to be changed to the other side of the house. She would never spend any more evenings overlooking the backs of the houses in Elvaston Road.

In her hand was the stump of candle. She looked at it thoughtfully. It would not last very long. She could not set fire to the flat. Elizabeth would perish and there would be no certainty of her own escape. Besides, small fires could be put out. She opened the window at the bottom. As Elizabeth had said, it was barred, but not so closely that she could not put a hand through. One faint possible hope came to her. She thrust out

her hand holding the candle and began to signal rapidly in Morse. By the grace of heaven, there was no wind that night. The candle flickered, but it was of substantial wax and Joan held it carefully. It did not go out. S.O.S., she signalled three times and then waited. Was there any hope? Suddenly a tiny flicker, like the beam of an electric torch, shone from her own boarding house. Breathlessly she watched it, trying to read the message. 'Where are you?' it signalled.

Joan nearly cried with joy. She had located the room and knew it was the one occupied by her friend Freddie Tearle, who would know that she was not signalling just for amusement.

'Thirty-two,' she signalled. 'Joan. Danger. Come.' That was all, for the candle expired and she heard at the same moment the sound of an attack on the door.

Time was everything. If she could hold them off till Freddie got round she would be safe. Seizing the table, she pushed it in front of the door, barricading it still further with the wash-stand. If she could not get out, at least she might make it difficult for others to get in.

From the other side of the door came a low laugh—a laugh so evil that Joan could hardly contain her terror. It was a laugh of knowledge—a laugh that showed its owner knew every move in the game from the first terrified entry to the final subjugation. The woman guessed that she had found Elizabeth; Joan concluded that she had deliberately left them alone together so that the process of mental torture might be well begun.

Would Freddie never come? And when he did come, would he bring help with him? How did one get into flats? Suppose they did not answer the door . . . suppose he could not break it down. Time meant so much. Joan threw one look at Elizabeth and saw that she had fainted—probably the best thing for her. But on her own shoulders rested the responsibility for saving them both. Well, she had done her best. She must wait.

The woman in the other room was getting impatient. Joan could hear an exclamation of temper when the bolt refused to give at the next onslaught. She could hear the old man whining,

'She's too fat . . . too fat' at intervals and then chuckling with filthy, senile amusement.

Being at the back of the house, she had no idea whether help was coming or not. She could only wait. Then the bolt gave. Joan crouched in a corner of the room, all courage gone. She was too late. The flimsy barrier could not protect her for more than a moment or two, and then. . . . She felt faint, and knew that her only chance was to keep the most supreme control over herself.

On the threshold stood the woman. She laughed when she saw the pile of furniture. She looked at Elizabeth hanging senseless in her bonds, and laughed again. 'So you found her,' she said contemptuously. 'Well, it will be your turn next. Slimming is so fashionable now. Our method of reducing is a little drastic, perhaps, but so efficacious. A most careful diet, adjusted to the finest proportions for giving life yet preventing a superfluity of flesh. In a few days you will hardly know yourself. Your clothes will hang on you so loosely that it will be simpler to remove them entirely. Besides, you won't need them here. We keep our patients under a very strict régime—no outings and no visitors—except the doctor, of course. And he comes twice daily.'

While she spoke, she was busily moving aside the table and washstand. Behind her, his chair blocking the doorway, was the old man. His fat, white fingers were clawing the air.

The woman came into the room. She looked carelessly at Joan as if she were a rabbit in a snare—so securely captured that there were no risks to take. She walked over to the window and closed it. 'You will feel that cold at first without your clothes,' she said, with a touch of reproof and a glance at Elizabeth.

She moved towards Joan, who shrank back against the wall. She expected the woman to seize her and she was prepared, with muscles tensed, to put up as good a fight as she could. To her surprise, nothing happened. The woman stood still. Joan gasped. In a second she realized the diabolicalness of the waiting. The lasso sped through the air and descended over her shoulders. Convulsively she attempted to move her arms to attack, but

to no purpose. She was safely caught, elbows drawn to her sides. And then the bell rang. . . . It pealed through the flat on a note that would not be denied. The woman shrugged her shoulders and laughed. 'Let them ring!' she said, and Joan's heart sank.

Again it pealed. And then came the most reassuring sound that Joan had ever heard. A stentorian voice shouted on the landing so that it was heard in the back room. 'Open in the name of the law!'

The old man squealed like a trapped animal. The woman dropped the lasso. With one movement she was across the room and had pulled the curtain in front of Elizabeth. Again came the command from outside. Springing on Joan, the woman gagged her swiftly with a handkerchief as though well accustomed to the procedure. Then she left the room, closing the door.

Joan struggled with the lasso. It bit cruelly, tightly into her arms and the more she struggled the tighter it seemed to get. Yet if she could not get free she might never be able to tell the police where she was. She was doubtful as to their powers. Could they insist on seeing all over the flat if there seemed nothing wrong? At last . . . she wrestled once more and suddenly felt the cord give. One arm was free. In a second the gag was out of her mouth and she was at the door, tearing it open and flinging herself into the outer room, upon a puzzled policeman and Freddie Tearle.

'Freddie, Freddie,' she cried. 'Save me . . . save me. . . . There's another girl in there.'

The old man squawked like a duck. The woman went over to him. Something passed between them, but Joan lost consciousness at that moment. She did not see the sudden pallor of death that came over both faces, the little bottle of cyanide that rolled to the floor, or the unconscious, barely breathing body of Elizabeth that was carried out of the inner room, wrapped in the curtain.

Afterwards, Freddie told her of the horror that had overtaken a brilliant scientist stricken with a loathsome disease, and the

woman who had been his assistant. 'They were better dead,' he ended, and Joan agreed.

Never again would she sit at any window after dark and neglect to draw the blinds. Never again could she look at blinds drawn opposite and refrain from a shuddering wonder as to what was going on behind them.

# THE DEATH PLANT

MICHAEL GWYNN

NOBODY really knew where the strange tale had its origin. A sceptical few, of which I was one, suspected Rheingelder of starting the story himself. Anyhow, whatever the origin, it became a butt of local wit and gossip for a short period and then drifted back into the past and was forgotten. But I have good reason for never forgetting it. 'What reason?' you ask, and my answer is my story.

There are some Englishmen who might as well live in Tooting as Port Said. It is for them a spot on the earth to eat, sleep and drink, but then one can do that just as well in any other part of the globe. Yet these gourmands are happier perhaps than the man who mixes and talks with the natives of a city, for the lies and legends and rather glamorous appeal of the latter has resulted in many strange happenings. Rheingelder's tragedy was but one of many, and yet I would not say it was either a lie or a legend which set him on the journey which ended so weirdly and, for Rheingelder at least, so tragically.

He was a little man, this German, and rather insignificant at first glance. But one was disillusioned immediately he was introduced, for he was vastly alive and energetic. He was nicknamed by some the 'irresistible', and he certainly gave the impression that nothing could prevent him from gaining an end at which he was aiming. His enthusiasm was catching, and I would never have conveyed him on my ship nor even listened to his fantastic tale had I not been filled with enthusiasm and absolute belief in the little German.

Almost five minutes after our first introduction, the man came to the point and told me he wished to charter my ship. In his characteristic way he did not allow me either to affirm or refuse, but took it for granted my services were enlisted immediately. He was comparatively rich, he said, and could pay me well. As for his destination? Ah! He told me simply with sublime naïvité and seeming seriousness that he was searching for two flowers which grew together from the same stalk. One was the life flower and the other the death. If the life flower was picked, the unfortunate human to whom it pertained died with the bloom. But, anyway, some day at an appointed time, the death plant would entwine and strangle the life plant and so a life was ended. Rheingelder said to me with absolute calmness, 'I shall find my plant and I shall kill the death bloom. . . .' He paused a moment and stared at me, or rather through me, out to the sea beyond. 'Then,' he whispered, 'then I shall be immortal.'

There were some who called me fool for agreeing with the 'madman', but I was being paid well by him and supposed him to be the victim of some money-seeking, native storyteller.

'Let him search until he tires of it,' said I, 'and meanwhile pay me.'

So very early one morning at four-thirty we set out on our mad search. For six months we cruised around the East Indies and further East among the South Pacific Islands, for Rheingelder said his spirit moved him there. My crew were getting restless and when we put in for a short time at Singapore they left in a body. However, I replaced them with comparative ease, for labour and good pay were scarce then, so much so that many of my old hands signed on again.

As for Rheingelder, his enthusiasm had not abated one bit and he even took many of his meals up in the crow's nest, with a powerful pair of glasses, searching the horizon. If ever he saw an island on which no signs of human occupation were visible, he would order me to steer in and immediately land with a search party. I wondered that the man, after so many fruitless

searches, did not lose hope, but he was always as keen and optimistic as when we first set out.

The months drifted by, and one morning Rheingelder came into my cabin looking unusually gloomy. It was the first time I had seen the little German depressed, and I wondered if he were at last tiring of his fruitless search. I was amazed to find that I dreaded the thought of finishing this mad venture. During the months we had been cruising, I had developed a keenness akin to Rheingelder's, so when he came to me that morning I felt terribly afraid that the eager days of expectancy were finished at last. I should have known the man better.

'Captain,' he said, 'I have no more money.'

He looked up at me. I returned his look a little sadly.

'For me,' I said, 'that does not matter; but I cannot pay a crew without money.'

'I have enough for one more month,' he answered, 'to get us back to port; then we must part—you and I.'

He held out his hand; I grasped it. 'Rheingelder,' I said, 'we shall not part. I will sell my boat, and we can outfit a two-man dinghy. We will find your flower, and when that search is ended, we will find mine.'

The German's despondent air fled in a second, and his grasp tightened on my hand. 'Thank you, captain,' he said. 'Thank you.'

The next minute he was up again in the crow's nest, his binoculars glued to his eyes.

And so the day came when Rheingelder and I set out alone, with a single Chinese hand and a small but serviceable and easily managed yacht . . . and so the search went on as before.

At the end of the sixth month our hand died, and in particularly strange circumstances. The man was a Buddhist and had on board a small brass image before which he used to bow and mumble and burn sickly scented joss-sticks. Rheingelder was always intensely amused to see him before his image and used to retire to his cabin, from which pealed shrieks of raucous mirth. In his own dogmatic belief in the death-plant he was completely amused by the crass stupidity of all unbelievers.

One afternoon he returned from his search on a small island carrying a fairly common plant in one hand. There were two red flowers branching from a single stalk and he seemed so hugely amused and excited I suspected he believed he had found his flower. But he merely chuckled at my inquiring looks and called for the hand. When the latter arrived, Rheingelder was quite serious, and handed him the flower.

'This,' he said, 'is a very sacred plant; place it in a pot and tend it well.'

He had dug it up by the roots so that, if planted and properly tended, it would remain living for its natural life-period. The hand placed it next to his Buddha and, showing great faith in Rheingelder's words, tended it carefully. My friend used to go and look at it pretty often.

One morning, several weeks after this, Rheingelder appeared unusually excited when he came in to breakfast. I did not think it exceptional at the time for he was always very cheerful at the commencement of another day in the search. When the Chinaman carried in our tray, the German looked at him closely.

'You do not look very well,' he said.

'No,' replied the man. 'Head—he ache bad.' He turned to me. 'Me no feel work today, me fever.'

I told him he could go to bed and went myself to give him quinine, believing he had malaria. As I passed the Buddha I saw Rheingelder staring at the plant in the pot; but he had done that every morning since he had brought it on board. I went on to the Chinaman's cabin. As I turned to shut the door I saw Rheingelder meddling with the plant, something bright held in his hand. I closed the door. Even as I stepped to the bunk the Chinaman tautened suddenly, half rose, quivering, his face working, then he fell back limply.

I knew now instinctively the significance of Rheingelder's interest in the plant and as I rushed and opened the door I saw him triumphantly holding aloft in one hand a severed bloom. As I started forward, he flung it far out to sea and hastened to his cabin. Racing across the deck, I heard him shouting and

laughing. I paused, and then went silently back and tended to the dead man. As I folded the arms and closed the eyes, an overwhelming horror and hate took the place of the interest I had had in Rheingelder, and I realized the fanaticism of the man's mind and the hideous indifference with which he regarded any life but his own.

The endless search had changed him and turned his brain, yet so slowly and imperceptibly I had not realized it till now. My outward attitude I took care appeared no different to the German, but that night, as I lay tossing fretfully in my bunk, the seed of my plan formed in my brain—a seed which was fostered by my hate of the revolting little German and by a hate which grew each successive day.

Rheingelder and I landed on an island one morning armed with the few weapons necessary for our search. We each had a sharp, heavy knife to cut our way through the undergrowth. As we fought and cut our way through the dense matted shrubs and creepers, I took great care to keep behind Rheingelder—ordinarily we worked side by side. I had cut myself a stout stick, for this was an essential part of my plan if we ever found the plant.

We had travelled a laborious four hundred yards into the jungle when we suddenly came upon a clearing. Rheingelder rushed madly forward. Almost in the centre of the clearing was a plant. It was the most beautiful plant I have ever seen or ever will see. The stem was smooth and shiny; it seemed to turn and twist in a hundred different ways; half-way up its stalk a second stem branched off, turning and twisting in the opposite direction. The bloom on this second stem was jet-black, bulbous, hairy—a loathsome live-looking bloom. On the other stalk was a bloom of the same description, but it was a deep red. I suppose Rheingelder had some intuition as to which was the life and which the death plant, for he instinctively struck off the black bloom with his knife. His eyes were bright and staring when he turned to me.

'Captain,' he whispered. 'Captain. . . .' His voice tailed off

and he mouthed, incapable of speaking in the glee of his awful realization.

"Yes," I answered, "Rheingelder, you are immortal!"

I held out my hand and as he moved his forward to grasp it, I felled him unconscious with my stick. Then, though my whole soul revolted at touching the horrible thing, I seized the stalk of black blossom and bound Rheingelder's feet and hands with it. At last he recovered consciousness and I waited with unholy joy for him to realize his position. He did eventually, writhing terribly in his bonds. He was mouthing and staring with horrified, bloodshot eyes. Staring, I say, staring—staring—staring. Staring at what? Staring at me! At me, slowly sawing through the stalk of the life bloom. Sawing slowly; very, very slowly; and each cutting, driving, deliberate stroke lessened the vigour of Rheingelder's struggles. There was one last thin shred of green shining stalk when I stopped. Rheingelder was very feeble now and his struggles convulsive and intermittent.

"Rheingelder," I called softly. "Rheingelder, look!" And I held up the death plant of the dead Chinese, with the stump of the severed life bloom there dry and withered. Then the German's body grew still, his face stopped working. I watched it closely. Suddenly he shrieked, piercingly, once, twice, and I severed the stem completely. There was a sudden silence and I heard Rheingelder's last shriek ringing still in the air.

I buried him there on the island under the roots of his own plant, and at his head I planted the Chinaman's death blossom. And there I left him, and when the day comes when my life bloom perishes, I shall not fear to go and meet Rheingelder, for I shall have the Chinaman's spirit as a guard and as a comrade.

But then, who knows? I'll find my flower yet, and then I shall say, "Captain, captain, you are immortal. . . ."

# THE TORTOISESHELL CAT

## GREYE LA SPINA

*Extract from a letter from Althea Benedict, Pine Valley Academy for Young Ladies, to Mrs. Wordsworth Benedict, New York:*

In spite of your care to reserve a room for me, Miss Annette Lee called me into her office yesterday and begged me to share it with a new girl.

It seems that Vida is the only child of a very old friend of hers, Felix de Monserreau, a rich Louisiana planter. Miss Lee says she thinks I may have a good influence over my new room-mate, but she managed to evade my tactful inquiry as to what Vida's vices might be. She did seem awfully disturbed. She said that she appreciated my nice attitude; and if I found the companionship disturbed me, would I report it to her immediately? She was so agitated she just couldn't look me in the face. I can't imagine what can be the matter with Vida.

So far, my new room-mate appears to be rather nice. Her father has been most generous and our room is the envy of all the other girls. I would have written you earlier, mother, but we've been getting our new things settled.

Vida wants everything to go with her particular style of beauty! She confessed that she was perfectly miserable if she didn't have a background that suited her, and that she knew I wouldn't mind—particularly as she was willing to pay for the decorations. So she has the room decorated in the most stunning fashion, in shades of orange and dull green, with heaps

and heaps of down cushions. She says she loves to lie around on a pile of cushions, like a cat.

I wish you could see her. She's really a type of girl to attract attention anywhere, with her dead-white skin, her dark-red lips, her black hair and her eyes—her eyes are quite the queerest I've ever seen. They are narrow, long, slumbrous, with drooping lids through which she looks at one in her peculiar way. The iris is a kind of pale golden-brown that gives the impression of warm yellow. When dusk comes, I've seen the pupil glowing with some strange iridescence, the iris a narrow rim of yellow about it; for all the world it makes me think of a cat's eye.

Don't forget to tell Cousin Edgar to send me the necklace he promised to bring me from Egypt. I've told the girls about it and they're dying to see it.

*Your Althea.*

*The same to the same:*

. . . Studies are going forward nicely. Nothing new, except a couple of rather queer things about my room-mate. I thought I'd better write to you first before saying anything to Miss Lee about it. Perhaps I'm only imagining things, anyway.

Vida is certainly a very odd girl, Mother. I am beginning to believe that she can see in the dark with those strange eyes of hers. What makes me think so? You know how I love to change furniture around every little while? The other day I altered the position of everything in the room. Vida wasn't there and before she came back the 'lights out' bell rang. I meant to stay awake and tell her not to fall over the table that was in front of her bed, but when she did come I was so drowsy that I didn't get a chance to speak to her before she reached her bed.

And, Mother, she threaded her way among those things just as if she could see them perfectly; not a single moment of hesitation. It gave me the most eerie feeling. I hid my head under the quilt, for I felt as if she was watching me in the dark. I know you'll laugh when you read this, but I didn't feel like laughing. And I still have an unpleasant feeling about it, for how could Vida walk so rapidly among those things, not one of

which was in the same position she had seen them last, unless she could actually see in the dark?

Last night another odd thing happened. There must have been crumbs in our waste-basket, for we heard a mouse rustling round in it. Just before I could switch on the light, I heard Vida bound across the room from her bed. When the light was on she stood by the waste-basket with that mouse in her hands, and, I can tell you, it was a dead mouse! She looked so strange that I squeaked at her, 'Vida!' She jumped, dropped the dead thing and scuttled back to bed. She seemed cross because I had put on the light, and I think she cried afterwards in the dark, although I can't be sure of it.

Mother, does it seem uncanny to you? I wonder if this night-sight is what Miss Annette referred to? I hate to say anything, for, after all, what's the harm in it?

. . . When is Cousin Edgar going to send me that necklace?

*The same to the same:*

. . . Something happened that I cannot help connecting with Vida. Yet I don't like to go to Miss Annette about it, I am sure she will smile and tell me I have an exceptionally lively imagination.

Vida and Natalie Cunningham had a dispute the other day about something or other, and Natalie looked it up and when she found Vida was right she was sarcastic about it—Natalie, I mean. Vida just looked at her with those strange golden eyes glowing, bit her lip and remained silent.

When we were alone afterward, Vida said to me, 'Do you know, Althea, I'm afraid something unpleasant is going to happen to Natalie.'

I must have looked surprised, for she went on hastily: 'There's some kind of invisible guardian watching over me, Althea, that seems to know when anyone is unkind to me. For years I've observed that punishment is visited on everyone who crosses me or troubles me in any way. It has made me almost afraid of having a dispute with anyone, for if I permit myself—

my real, inner self—to grow disturbed, something always happens to the person at the root of the trouble.'

Of course, I hooted at her forebodings. I told her she was superstitious and silly. But, Mother, that night Natalie Cunningham lost her favourite ring, a stunning emerald. It was stolen right off her dressing-table five minutes after Natalie turned off her light. She got up again to unlock the door for her room-mate, put on the light—and the ring wasn't where she had left it.

The door was still locked; the window was open, but it was a third-storey window, as most of the dormitory windows in our building are, and there is no balcony under it.

Mysterious, wasn't it? Our floor monitor, Miss Poore, declared that Natalie must have dropped her ring on the floor, but Natalie has hunted and hunted. The ring certainly isn't in her room. Who took it? How? It frightened Natalie so that she is afraid to be alone in her room without a light.

The odd thing about it is the way Vida looked at me when the girls told us about it. She actually wants me to believe that her 'invisible guardian' stole the ring to punish Natalie for having been sarcastic to her. Did you ever?

I wonder if poor Vida is—well, just a bit flighty, Mother? How about that necklace?

### *The same to the same:*

... I'm so excited that I can't write coherently. All the school is in an uproar because of what took place last night. I am more disturbed than the rest, for I am beginning to have a suspicion that Vida is right when she says that unpleasant things happen to people who cross her. It makes me nervous, for fear she may get provoked at me for something. I don't know whether or not I ought to report the whole thing to Miss Annette; I'm afraid she'll think I'm romancing. Won't you please write and tell me what to do?

Yesterday morning, Vida's old coloured mammy, Jinny, who is in Pine Valley in order to be near her charge, came up for Vida's laundry. Miss Poore came in while Vida was putting her

soiled things together and offered to help sort them over.

Mammy Jinny gave a kind of convulsive shiver. She looked up at Vida, staring hard at her for a moment. Vida stared back in a queer, fixed way. Then my room-mate's eyes flashed yellow fire. She told Miss Poore in a kind of fury that she'd better mind her own business and not stick her old-maid nose into other people's private concerns.

Miss Poore was wild. (You can't blame her. It was really nasty of Vida.) She took Vida by the shoulders and shook her hard. Vida didn't resist, but she looked at the floor monitor with such an expression of malice that Miss Poore actually stepped back in dismay.

'I'm sorry for you, Miss Poore,' said Vida to her. 'I'm afraid you're going to suffer exceedingly for laying your hands on me. I'd save you if I could—but I can't.'

Miss Poore went out of the room without answering. Vida gave the laundry to Mammy Jinny, who insisted upon taking laundry-bag and all. After the old coloured woman had gone, Vida flung herself on her bed and cried for an hour. She said she was crying because she was sorry for Miss Poore. I failed at the time to see any significance in her remark, until after last night—

About two o'clock this morning the whole floor was wakened by the most terrible screams coming from Miss Poore's room. I sprang out of bed and rushed into the hall, where I met the other girls, all pouring out of their rooms. We rushed up to Miss Poore's room and she finally got her door open to let us in.

Mother, she was a sight! Face, hands, arms were all covered with blood from bites and scratches. She was hysterical, and no wonder. She declared that some kind of wild animal had jumped in at her window and attacked her in the dark. The queer thing is, how did that creature—if there was one—get into her room and then get out again before we opened the hall door? Her window is open, but it is a third-storey one, and there is no tree nearby from which an animal could have sprung into her room.

She is in such a condition this morning that Miss Annette told us in chapel she would have to leave the school to recover

from the nervous shock incidental to the attack. The mystery of it is the only topic of conversation today, as you can imagine. And now for the odd part of it.

When I got back to my room, there lay Vida, apparently sound asleep. She hadn't been disturbed by all that racket. Some sleeper; I woke her and told her.

Mother, she lay awake the rest of the night, crying and carrying on terribly, declaring it was all her fault, although she couldn't help it. Her statement was rather confusing. She insisted it was her 'invisible guardian' who had attacked Miss Poore, but she begged me not to tell anyone. Her advice was superfluous; if I went to Miss Annette with such a statement she'd think either Vida was crazy or I was simple.

I tried to sleep, but I can tell you I left the light on. And I wasn't the only one; all the girls had lights in their rooms the rest of the night.

The coincidences are strange, aren't they, Mother? Natalie displeases Vida and has her emerald ring mysteriously stolen. Miss Poore displeases Vida and gets scratched and bitten. But even a coincidence can't explain why a wild-cat should bite Miss Poore on Vida's behalf, can it?

Do please write to me soon and tell me what I ought to do about informing Miss Annette.

### *The same to the same:*

I took your advice and told Miss Annette. She said she must trust my discretion not to let the other girls know anything she told me, and then admitted that Vida has been followed by this reputation in every school she's been in, until her father couldn't enter her in some schools. Something unpleasant always happens to any person who displeases Vida de Monserreau. And although she disclaims having done anything, yet she declares it is done for her.

Miss Annette asked me if I wanted to have my room to myself. I thought that Vida hadn't really done anything to me, and she had certainly made our room the nicest in school.

I decided to let her stay on, and Miss Annette thanked me so heartily that I was actually embarrassed.

... Why didn't you tell me Cousin Edgar was coming down? I couldn't imagine who it was when I was called to the reception room to see a gentleman. Imagine my surprise!

He gave me the chain, Mother, and it is perfectly precious! Have you seen it? It is tiny carved cats with their tails in their mouths, and the pendant is a great jade cat with topaz eyes. The girls are wild over it, and Vida particularly is simply crazy about it. She asked me if Cousin Edgar couldn't get her one like it.

Cousin Edgar said rather a funny thing. He clasped the chain about my neck and declared that I must promise not to take it off without his permission. Now why do you suppose he did that? When I asked him he just shrugged his shoulders and said something about your having shown him my letters. What have my letters to do with my promising not to take off the cat chain?

Yesterday he came over to take me driving. When he came into the reception room he thrust out his chin in that odd way of his and said abruptly: "There's a cat in the room. Thought Miss Annette didn't allow pet animals."

I knew there couldn't be one, but he insisted and began to look about the room. And then—the oddest thing, Mother! We came upon Vida de Monserreau asleep in a big armchair by the fireplace. She had crouched on her knees, with her hands out on the arm of the chair and her chin on her outstretched hands, for all the world like a comfortable pussy-cat.

I said to Cousin Edgar, 'Here's your cat,' and laughed.

He looked at Vida closely. Then he said softly to me, 'Althea, you are speaking more to the point than is your wont.' (You know how he loves to tease me, Mother.) 'Introduce me to the pussy,' said he.

I woke Vida. She was terribly embarrassed to have been seen in such an unconventional pose, but she told me afterwards that she liked Cousin Edgar more than any other man she'd ever

met. I think he liked her, too, although of course he didn't say much to me about it.

Vida asked him almost at once if he hadn't got another cat-chain like mine. She'd taken a tremendous fancy to it, she said.

'Perhaps you can prevail upon Althea to give you hers! If you can, I'll get her something else to take its place.'

At this suggestion of his, Vida turned imploring eyes on me. Mother, I was disturbed. I thought of what had happened to Natalie and to Miss Poore, and I wondered if something horrible would happen to me if I refused to give Vida my chain. So I just put it to her, point-blank.

'What will happen to me if I don't give you my chain, Vida?'

'Nothing to you, Althea, darling. I could never be really angry at you,' she whispered.

'Then please don't ask me to give up my chain,' I begged.

I looked back as I went from the room with Cousin Edgar, and her eyes were on me in the most wistful way. Poor Vida!

... I wonder what the attraction is? Cousin Edgar is remaining here for an indefinite visit, he says. I do hope he hasn't fallen in love with Alma Henning: I simply cannot bear that girl. I suppose he won't ask my advice, though, if he has fallen in love with one of the girls. Belle Bragg is wild over him, and Natalie thinks him scrumptious.

He has old Peter with him and is stopping at the little hotel in Pine Valley.

### *The same to the same:*

... I suppose I ought to tell you some of the things I've hardly dared write before because they are so—well, so extraordinary. I've been afraid you might think something the matter with my brain because I'd been studying too hard. Cousin Edgar says it is in good condition and my head straight on my shoulders, and to write you the whole thing, exactly what I thought about it.

Mother, there is something uncanny about Vida de Monserreau. I told you how cat-like she was at times, and how she loves sitting in the dark, or prowling about the room in the dark.

The other day I came into the room ten minutes before lights-out. The room was empty when I turned on the light. But as I went to my desk, a great tortoiseshell cat was stretching itself lazily in the armchair where Vida loves to sit, near the window.

Like a flash, Miss Poore's experience passed through my mind, and I started for the door. As I got to the hall, I turned around and—Mother, believe me or not—there wasn't a sign of a cat. But sitting in the armchair, staring at me with those queer yellow eyes of hers, was Vida de Monserreau.

I sat down on a chair near the door and breathed hard for a moment. Then I said, 'My gracious, Vida, how you startled me! I didn't see you when I came in. What happened to the cat?'

'Cat?' said she, yawning. 'What cat?' She stretched her arms lazily and settled herself comfortably on the cushions.

I can tell you I felt queer. My eyes had played me a very strange trick, making me see a striped black and yellow cat where Vida was sitting. I felt it best to say no more to her for fear she might think me out of my mind. But the more I think about it, the more I am convinced that there was a cat.

And if I did see a cat stretching and yawning on the armchair, where, if you please, was Vida while I was looking at the cat? And where did the animal get to? (I looked everywhere before I'd go to bed, though I didn't tell Vida what for. I pretended I'd mislaid my gym slippers that were all the time in my locker. I could feel her yellow eyes on me while I peeped under the beds and around.)

When I happened to mention the incident to Cousin Edgar, he told me not to forget that I'd promised not to remove the chain he'd given me. He said something about it being a talisman to ward off evil influences.

Now, Mother, don't write and tell me not to study so hard! Cousin Edgar doesn't think I'm crazy or delirious, so I guess you needn't.

*The same to the same:*

... This morning Cousin Edgar called me on the telephone to

ask if anything had been stolen from one of the girls last night. There had. Grace Dreene had lost a locket and chain. Cousin Edgar asked if the locket had her initials on it in chip diamonds! How did he know? I'll tell you.

Last night he was sleepless, so he took a walk up here. The moon was shining directly on my side of the dormitory and he distinctly saw a great tortoiseshell cat come out of what he thought was my room.

There is a very narrow ledge round the building under the windows, about three inches wide. The cat walked along that ledge until it reached Grace's window, where it jumped in. After a moment it came out with something glittering in its mouth!

Cousin Edgar hissed: 'Scat!' The cat hesitated, startled, and the thing went flashing from its mouth to the ground. Cousin Edgar watched it go back to my room, then he picked up the article. It was Grace's locket and chain. The cat had stolen it from Grace's room! Did you ever hear of anything so queer, Mother? I've read of monkeys and jackdaws—but a cat!

Cousin Edgar mailed the chain to Grace. Fancy the astonishment of the girls when the stolen thing came back through the mail!

But what do you make of it? The cat came out of and went back into my room! The things I do think are so extraordinary that I'm afraid to say them, even to myself.

*From Captain Edgar Benedict's notebook:*

After having found out all I could from Althea about the strange facts in this most interesting case, I determined to follow the only clue that presented itself, i.e., the old coloured mammy. It seems that she called regularly every Tuesday, so I made a point to linger near the academy on a Tuesday morning, and was rewarded by seeing the old woman appear bright and early for her young mistress's laundry.

She is a queer character. Far from being the decrepit old creature I had been led to expect by Althea's description, she is a tall, handsome mulatto woman, with flashing eyes that hold a

strange magnetism in their direct, unblinking gaze. Her face is deeply etched by the character of her thoughts rather than by the hand of time. She carries herself humbly when in the presence of academy people, but I have seen her, once out of sight of the school, straighten up that gaunt form and throw her head back proudly, altering her dragging walk into a brisk and lively stride.

She carried the young lady's fresh laundry into the academy and in half an hour came out laden with the soiled laundry, which she had in an embroidered laundry-bag. Once out of sight of the school she broke into a rapid swinging walk, and I had much ado to keep her in sight. She reached Pine Valley and made for the negro quarters, where she entered a house that I noted carefully.

As I wanted very much to get a personal impression of her, I knocked at the door and inquired if she could do my laundry work. She stared at me, pride in those black eyes of hers. Then she said very curtly that she did washing for one person only, and shut the door in my face. There is a fierce, implacable atmosphere about that old black woman. I would dislike tremendously to arouse her hatred.

... Just got back from a night visit to Mammy Jinny's cabin. Fortunately when I got there she had left a full inch of space between the window-frame and the lower edge of the window-shade. Through it I got a fine view of the old witch—for witch she certainly is, and somehow involved in the experiences in the academy.

It is not the first time I have watched a witch's incantations. But I have never before had such a strong personal interest in them.

The old negress pulled out the laundry from the bag and with it tumbled a flashing emerald ring! That must have been the ring of Natalie Cunningham. How did it get into Vida de Monserreau's soiled laundry unless put there by Vida herself? Is Vida an accomplice or an innocent victim?

Mammy Jinny now drew from her bosom a stocking and shook out of it as fine a collection of rings, bracelets, brooches,

chains as I've ever seen outside a jeweller's shop. She laid the emerald ring with them and sat staring at her plunder. After a while, she pushed it back into her hiding-place. Then she began to pace the dirt floor of her squalid cabin.

As she walked, she muttered. Sometimes she wrung her hands. Fragments of her words drifted to my ears as I listened:

'My baby Vida—my little missy! Forgive me, missy! But you must pay for your father's crime. I cannot forgive him!'

All at once she flung herself down before the hearth, for all the world like a great cat, and began to stare unblinkingly into the smouldering embers. By my watch she remained in that posture absolutely motionless for fully two hours, during which I honestly wished I were elsewhere; there was something about her tense attitude that conveyed a baleful significance to my intuition. I knew that she was projecting her mental powers to accomplish her black purposes, like the evil old witch she was. It was hardly an agreeable situation for me, but I dared not move until she herself began to stir.

I have an idea that the witch, the tortoiseshell cat and the odd Vida are more closely connected than might seem credible. I must take Althea somewhat into my confidence.

. . . My plan worked perfectly. Vida was very happy to possess the cat-chain and easily agreed not to take it off. Last night I kept watch over the old negress and Althea—at my request—watched Vida. Vida slept peacefully through the very hours when I watched Mammy Jinny sweating and working her incantations in vain.

. . . I am on the right track. Althea tells me that Mammy Jinny came into the academy and ordered Vida to take off the cat-chain. Vida refused with what seemed natural indignation. Mammy Jinny told her the chain was 'Bad voodoo'. Vida stood firm. The old negress was so furious that when she left she forgot to bow herself and strode away, full height, much to Vida's astonishment.

. . . Althea has been carrying out my further directions with a cleverness and tact that does her credit. She snipped one of the links in the chain when Vida wasn't looking, and Vida has

asked me to have it repaired, as my cousin suggested. Tonight Vida will be without the protection of the chain. I have instructed Althea as to her part and I shall myself watch the old witch.

. . . All last night Mammy Jinny worked her spells. They were successful this time. Althea has told me what happened.

Althea saw the cat steal from Vida's bed to the window and return with a stolen bracelet in its mouth. It dropped the article into Vida's laundry-bag. Then, as Althea expressed it, the cat sprang into Vida's bed and—there lay Vida, peacefully sleeping. No wonder Althea couldn't close her eyes for the rest of the night.

When one of the girl's chums came in to say that a bracelet was missing, Althea had it ready to return. She said she had picked it up in the hall.

I am going to put a stop to the whole business. It is voodoo, pure and simple, with a taste of the devil that is unpleasant, to say the least. Whatever the old negress's intentions, she must not attempt to carry them out by means of an innocent young white girl who has somehow fallen under her dominant will-power. If I cannot put a quick stop to it, I shall tell Vida de Monserreau exactly what she has to fear and provide her with a talisman.

Last night was certainly a thrilling one from start to finish. I sent old Peter to remain outside Mammy Jinny's cabin, for I wanted a full report of her actions. I, myself, with Miss Annette's kind co-operation, hung a stout rope-ladder from Althea's window while the two inmates of the room were in the gymnasium and covered the top with pillows to conceal it from prying eyes.

At about one-thirty a.m. the great cat came out of Althea's window—left open for the purpose—and went out upon the narrow ledge. It made me hold my breath. (What if it had fallen? The thought makes me shudder yet.) It disappeared within another window and I went quickly under our own and called to Althea that it was number five along the row. She closed hers at once and went to Belle Bragg's room, where the cat had gone in.

Both girls saw it go out of the window. Then Belle looked at her dressing-table and found her wrist-watch missing. Althea said she thought one of the girls had borrowed it and would bring it back in the morning. Then Belle closed her window—a vain precaution—and Althea returned to her own room.

Meanwhile, I had mounted the ladder quietly until I was directly under Althea's window, where I braced myself strongly, for what I had in mind would follow.

The cat found the window closed. It beat with its forepaws at the pane in a pitiful manner.

I reached up and tossed the repaired cat-chain about its neck. Although I had rather anticipated what followed, it made me gasp, for it was the limp, unconscious body of Vida de Monserreau that I supported in my arms!

Althea opened the window and between us we got the poor girl on to her bed. I warned Althea to be silent and was off to find old Peter and get his report.

I was thoroughly provoked when I found he was not on watch outside the cabin as I had expected him to be. Then I peered under the window-shade. What I saw was my old black Peter squatting on the floor before the hearth, his arm about that old witch and her head resting on his shoulder!

I was furious! I gave a thundering rap at the door. Peter let me in. But the old scoundrel, instead of seeming ashamed and guilty, met me with a broad grin that showed his white teeth from ear to ear. To my further astonishment, Mammy Jinny rose to her full height with a grin that matched his.

It took my breath away. I demanded an explanation. Between them, it was mighty hard to find out the truth, for it was a long story that went back to the girlhood of the old negress.

She and Peter were slaves owned by Vida's grandfather. When a valuable ring was missing, the old man charged Peter with the theft and sold him into a distant state where he could never hope to see his wife again. Jinny knew the facts, but what good would it have done her to have told them? She might have received a whipping. She knew that her young master had given the ring to a white girl whom he was courting on the sly.

Jinny appealed to 'young marse'. He laughed in her face. She determined then to be revenged. Concealing her hatred, she demanded and received the care of Vida when 'young marse's' wife died in child-birth.

From that time on, Mammy Jinny worked out her plans, using her knowledge of voodoo, until she had so bent the child's will to hers that Vida was absolutely responsive to the old negress's thoughts. How she performed the apparent metamorphosis I had seen she would not tell, however, but only looked at me defiantly out of her proud eyes.

Mammy's idea of revenge seems to have been to fasten the disgrace of the theft upon Vida de Monserreau, thus shaming 'young marse'. Her methods of accomplishing her end are, like all methods of black magic, better left undisclosed to the general public.

As old Peter had long ago owed me loyalty since I saved his life years ago, I had little difficulty in persuading him to take his wife to Jamaica, from which place they were originally bought, and where Peter in later years returned in hope of meeting Jinny there once more. They will be out of Vida's life henceforth.

This does not mean that Vida is to go unprotected. I shall take over that, with the permission of her father. But I do not believe that old Jinny will ever again crouch in invocation to the Evil Powers to bring the tortoiseshell cat into materialisation at Vida's expense.

# THE TAPPING

J. DYOTT MATTHEWS

JULIAN MATTERTON, manager of the Pristford branch of Riley's Bank, looked at his watch. Twenty minutes past five. Would they never leave? There were only two clerks in the bank now, besides the chief cashier. The others had gone and the workmen had left at midday. The latter had been putting the finishing touches to the strongroom which was to take the place of the antiquated safe, unworthy of so important a provincial branch as Pristford. Already all the boxes, securities and valuables which had filled the safe to overflowing had been placed in it, leaving room for much more.

Matterson was nervous and overwrought. At the best of times he was highly strung—now his nerves were at such a tension that he thought with a grim little laugh that at any moment he might become insane. But at all costs he must not lose his head. That would be fatal to his scheme. For this was the day for which he had been waiting. He had had the valuables moved into the strongroom as they would be the easier to select in the added space afforded by it, and also through some queer kink in his brain it flattered his vanity to take them from a strong-room.

He looked at his watch again. Half past five. The two clerks were preparing to go. He mopped his brow. God! wasn't it hot. He knew that at his branch of Riley's, at least, the junior clerk would wait until the manager left, out of courtesy and a necessity for locking up the premises. He had therefore informed

his chief cashier, whose name was Roach, of his intention of working late and had given instructions that all the clerks could leave. He had left his attempt late enough. By six-thirty they would all be gone.

He felt almost like rushing out of his sanctum and yelling. 'Get out, damn you, every one of you, get out!'

He smiled a little nervously when he thought of the consternation such an act on his part would cause. Would those clerks never go? They were standing in front of the counter, talking about cricket. He distinctly heard the names of Hobbs and Hendren mentioned. He inwardly cursed them. Who cared about Hobbs and Hendren on a night like this?

They left the bank together. There was only one member of the staff remaining—Roach.

How he loathed the man. The very sight of the brushed-back hair, which had to be brushed well back in order to hide the small but slowly increasing patch of baldness which could just be seen between the strands, made him bad-tempered. The sight of the bald spot with its fringe of hair irritated him. The gold-legged, horn-rimmed spectacles, which were worn so low on the nose as to appear at any moment to be about to fall off, annoyed him. The sparse, scanty eyebrows got on his nerves. He hated the cold, fish-like grip of the flabby fingers when he shook hands. But what he detested most of all was the cool, suave manner of the man—his perpetual urbanity. He reminded Matterson, whenever he saw him talking to the customers of the bank, of a churchwarden or sidesman showing members of the congregation into their pews.

And now this man Roach seemed to be watching him. Could he guess? Of course not. It was only nerves that made him think so, he told himself with a shrug of the shoulders and a well-assumed air of nonchalance. But if he did know, who could have told him? He had only one confederate—Hislop, his chauffeur—but Hislop wouldn't breathe a word; he was trustworthy. Besides, it was to his own advantage to keep his mouth

shut. Wasn't he going to receive a quarter share of the booty?

But again, supposing Hislop were a detective put on his trail by Scotland Yard? Fool that he was, letting his thoughts run riot like this. To get back to where he had started. If Hislop were a traitor, what possible object could he have in telling Roach? Perhaps they were working together? No, that was impossible—Roach had been in the bank for thirty years.

Anyway, he had with him his trusty Colt, which had stood him in good stead during the war and was now fitted with a silencer. He tried not to remember how it had neatly placed a bullet in the heart of one of his superior officers who had been reported 'killed in action', thus leaving the command and the rank in the hands of Captain Matterson, as he was then. Nothing was going to stand in his way. He had everything tacked down in his plans for a grand coup. Hislop was to be at the back entrance with the car at six-thirty. By that time he was to have opened the strongroom, taken out the jewels which Lady Bisnell had deposited there and put them into a couple of suitcases.

If a police constable were to accost him, he would say he was going away for a short holiday and had brought the bags up to the bank in the morning in order to be able to get straight off. But no police officer would interfere with him—he was too well known in the district—as the prosperous manager of an exceedingly prosperous bank.

He left his seat at his roll-topped desk in his glass-enclosed sanctum and went up to Roach, a forced smile on his lips. 'Not gone yet, Roach?'

'No such luck, sir,' he said, laughing in his heavily jocular style.

'Well, I should cut along, old man.' It almost hurt him to use this term of endearment to one whom he loathed, but he checked his repugnance.

'Thanks, I have just one little matter to finish before I go.'

'Leave it till tomorrow morning.'

'I can't—that's why I want to get it done tonight.'

'I insist on your leaving soon.'

A suspicious glow came into the somewhat piglike eyes of the other.

'Why are you so keen for me to go? You ought to be pleased with me for getting the work up to date.'

'Oh, I am pleased'—he had an answer ready for that question—but with Lady Bisnell's heirlooms and family jewels, which I believe are almost priceless, in the bank, I naturally want to lock up myself and I don't want to be up too late.'

'Oh, I see. Well, I'll be going, in that case,' he said, putting the ledger into which he had been writing into his drawer.

'Good-night.'

'Good-night, Roach,' replied the manager.

He waited in his office for about half an hour after this in case, as he said to himself, Roach might come back for something. Then, taking up his two bags and necessary keys, and having locked both doors to the bank on the inside, he made his way to the strongroom. There was no light in the place, although there was a plug near the floor by the door to which a wire attached to a bulb could be fixed. This did not worry Matterson, however; he had his pocket torch and soon had the door of the strongroom opened.

This room was on the ground floor, the premises having no basement. He unlocked and pushed open the massive steel door and, entering, placed the two bags on the floor. Then he went to Lady Bisnell's chest and dragged it to the doorway. He opened the box with a file and a screwdriver, and began to transpose the jewels—the most dazzlingly beautiful he had ever seen—from it to his own bags.

'So this is why you wanted me away!'

Matterson spun round, his face grey and ashen. 'What the——' he gasped, then regained his composure. 'Stick 'em up!'

Roach did so, eyeing the barrel of the revolver nervously.

'Now,' said Matterson, 'I'm going to shoot you like a dog. I've hated you for years. I can't stand your flabby handshake.'

or your greasy hair. You get on my nerves. I detest you. But first tell me how you came to suspect me.'

'Well'—in a shaking voice Roach replied—'I happened to be present at Victoria Station when you were booking your ticket for the boat-train. I didn't think until tonight that you would make your attempt so soon. I also was booking my passage to the Continent. I am on the same game as yourself. Can't we work together on a fifty-fifty basis?'

'How the deuce did you get in, then?' he said, paying no attention to the offer of the other. 'I locked both doors of the bank.'

'I never went out. I was in the washplace all the time, with the light turned out, waiting for your next move.'

'You cur. I'll have no more of your sneaking ways.'

'Plop!' The heavy Colt with its silencer made a dull noise and Roach fell to the floor, sprawling over the suitcases.

Matterson left the room, locked the door, and went off with his bags to remove bloodstains from them in the washplace next door.

Roach, who was not hit in a vital part, came to himself after a couple of minutes. His face was terribly hot—he was almost overpowered by the heat. What could he do to stop his face burning? He glanced up at the shelves, then saw something which cheered him—if only he could reach it.

That same afternoon he had knocked down the electric fan in the office and had broken three of its wings. He had told the second cashier to put it somewhere in a safe place, pending its repair, at the same time giving him some ledgers to put in the strongroom. He had obviously put the fan in this steel-lined room also.

Slowly Roach raised himself to his feet, reached down the plug and inserted it in its socket. He turned on the switch and was reaching for the fan when a feeling of nausea overcame him. He got his fingers on to it, but, as he grasped it, unconsciousness came upon him and he fell, half into the chest. The fan, now revolving fast, fell into the box underneath him.

making a tapping sound every now and then as the remaining wing struck something in the box.

Five minutes later, Matterson was passing the door of the strongroom on his way to the exit and heard the noise of rapid knocking coming from the interior of the room.

He stood aghast for a moment. What could be the meaning of that mysterious sound? Surely Roach was dead? Perhaps he had been mistaken. Perhaps the tapping was not from the strongroom after all. He put his head against the door. Yes, it was certainly coming from within.

Tap! Tap! Tap! It came in regular intervals at first, then there were pauses in between the sounds. It reminded him of the Morse he had learnt in the army. Surely Roach was not signalling? Could it be a bird which had become imprisoned? No! No bird could possibly get in there—besides, he would have noticed it when he himself went in earlier.

Tap! Tap! Tap! It could be no one but Roach—Roach was winning the last trick after all. He would only have to keep himself conscious till the following day, make that tapping noise and the police would immediately detain him—Matterson—at Dover before he could embark in the morning cross-Channel steamer. Anyway, he must kill him. By midday he would be well away. He knew a little place on the west coast of France. . . . Then a weird, uncanny thought came to him—could it be Roach's soul trying to get out? But nothing could bar a soul's exit. Nothing. Anyway, he would go in and see. Roach would not cheat him.

He entered the room, leaving the key on the outside of the lock. As he went in, he tripped over the wire of the electric fan, disconnecting it immediately. The tapping ceased at once.

'You thought you could cheat me, did you? Pretending to be dead, now, are you? Well, I'll finish you off,' he said, lowering his face near to the other's, and snarling at him.

He pulled him out of the box and leaned him against the heavy, half-open door. Then he raised his revolver and fired, emptying the remaining cylinders. At the impact of the first

shot, the solid steel door began to move almost imperceptibly, and with the last it closed with a click.

Then he realized what he had done. The door was fitted with a snap lock and he was imprisoned with the man he had murdered.

With a shriek of delirious madman's laughter, Matterson lifted Roach's body and dumped it into the open chest.

OSCAR COOK

DENNIS sat on the veranda of his bungalow and gazed meditatively about him. He could not look at the view because there was none to speak of, since the house was built on an island in the middle of the Luago River. On all sides of the island grew the tall, rank elephant grass and nipa palm. Here and there a stunted, beetle-ridden coconut tree just topped the dense vegetation, a relic of some clearing and plantation begun by some native then left to desolation and the ever-encroaching jungle.

Dennis was bored. He was two years overdue for leave ; also the day was unusually hot. The hour was about four, but though the sun was beginning to slant there was no abatement in the fierceness of its rays. After lunch he had followed the immemorial custom and undressed for a short siesta, but sleep was denied him. The mechanical action of undressing had quickened his brain. The room seemed stifling ; the bed felt warm. He bathed, dressed and betook himself to the veranda. Here he smoked and thought.

And his thoughts were none too pleasant, for there was much that was troubling him. Throughout the morning he had been listening to the endless intricacies of a native land case—a dispute over boundaries and ownership. He had reserved his judgment till the morrow, for the evidence had been involved and contradictory. He had meant to go over the salient points during the afternoon, and instead, here he was, smoking on his veranda,

thinking of an entirely different matter. Try as he would, his mind would not keep on the subject of the land, but roamed ever and ever over the mystery that was fast setting its seal of terror and fear on the district.

From the village in the source of the river strange rumours had come floating downstream. At first they were light and airy as thistledown—just a passing whisper—a fairy story over which to smile—then they passed, but came again, more substantial and insistent, stronger and sterner, and not to be denied. Their very number compelled a hearing ; their very sameness breathed a truth. Inhabitants from the village had gone forth and never returned ; never a trace of them had been found. First a young girl, then her father. She had been absent six days and he had gone to look for her. But he looked in vain and in his turn disappeared. Then a young boy, and next an aged woman. Then, after a long period, a tame ape and finally the headman's favourite wife.

Fear settled on the village ; its inhabitants scarce dared leave their houses, save in batches, to collect food and water. But fear travels fast, and the rumours reached Klagan and came to Dennis' ears. In the end the mystery caught him in its toils, waved itself into his every waking moment and excited his interest beyond control.

An idle native story ; the tale of a neighbouring village with an axe of its own to grind. He was a fool to worry over it. Such mare's nests were of almost daily occurrence : thus Dennis argued. And then from two other villages came similar tales. Two little girls had gone to bathe in the height of the noonday sun. At moonrise they had not returned. Nor in the days that passed were they ever seen again. Two lovers met one moonlight night and waded to a boulder in midstream of the river. Here they sat oblivious of the world around them. They were seen by a couple of natives passing downstream in their boat—and then—never again.

Down the river crept the cold, insidious fear like a plague, taking toll of every village in its path. In their houses huddled the natives, while crops were unsown and pigs uprooted the

plantations ; while crocodiles devoured untended buffaloes and squirrels and monkeys rifled the fruit trees. From source to mouth the fear crept down, and in the end forced Dennis's hand, compelling him to action.

Thus, as he sat on his veranda and cursed the heat of the sun and the humidity of the tropics, unbidden and unsought, the mystery filled his thoughts, and he began to wonder as to if and when his native sergeant and three police would return. For he had sent them to the *ulu* (source) to probe and solve the meaning of the rumours. They had been gone three weeks, and throughout this time no word had been heard of or had come from them.

In the office a clock struck five. Its notes came booming across to Dennis. Then silence—not complete and utter silence ; such is never possible in the tropics, but the silence of that hour when the toilers—men and animals—by day realize that night is approaching ; when the toilers by night have not yet awakened.

Lower and lower sank the sun. In the sky a moon was faintly visible. Dennis rose, about to call for tea, then checked the desire. From afar upstream came the chug-chug-chug of a motor-boat. Its beat just reached his ears. He looked at his wrist-watch. In ten minutes he would go down to the floating wharf. That would give him plenty of time to watch the boat round the last bend of the river. In the meanwhile—

But he went at once to the wharf after all, for the mystery gripped him, causing him feverishly to pace up and down the tiny floating square. Chug-chug-chug—louder and louder came the noise ; then fainter and fainter, and then lost altogether as the dense jungle cut off the sound as the boat traversed another bend of the river. Chug-chug-chug, faintly, then louder and stronger. A long-drawn note from the horn of a buffalo smote the air and the boat swung round the final bend. Only a quarter of a mile separated it now from Dennis.

As the boat drew nearer, he saw that she was empty save for the serang and boatmen. Then the fear gripped him, too, and he quickly returned to the house. With shaking hand he poured

out a whisky and soda, flung himself into a chair and shouted for his 'boy'.

"*Tuan!*" The word, though quietly spoken, made him flinch, for the 'boy' had approached him silently, as all well-trained servants do. Quickly, too, he had obeyed the summons, but in that brief space of time Dennis's mind had escaped his body and immediate wants to roam the vast untrodden fields of speculation and fear.

With an effort he pulled himself together.

"The motor-boat is returning. Tell the serang (helmsman) to come to me as soon as he has tied up. See that no one is within earshot."

"*Tuan,*" and the 'boy' departed.

Scarcely had the 'boy' left than the serang stood in front of Dennis. His story was brief, though harrowing, but it threw no light upon the mystery. For two days, till they had reached the rapids, they had used the motor-boat. Then they transhipped into a native dugout, leaving the motor-boat in the charge of a village headman. For three days they had paddled and poled upstream till they came to the mouth of the Buis River. Here the sergeant and police left them, telling them to wait for their return, and struck inland along a native track. For sixteen days they waited, though their food had given out and they had taken turns to search the jungle for edible roots. Then on the sixteenth day it had happened—the horrible coming of Nuin.

The boatman had gone to look for roots. The serang was dozing in a dugout. Suddenly it shook and rocked. Something clutched the serang's arm. It was Nuin's hand. Startled into wakefulness, the serang sat up; then he screamed and covered his eyes with his hands. When he dared look again, Nuin was lying on the river bank. His clothes were in rags. Round his chest and back ran a livid weal four inches wide. His left leg lay broken and twisted. His right arm was entirely missing. His face was caked in congealed blood.

As the serang looked, Nuin opened his lips to speak, but his voice was only a whisper. Tremblingly, haltingly, the serang went to him and put his ear to his mouth. 'Sergeant—others—

dead—three days west man—with big—big—others.' The whisper faded away ; Nuin gave a shudder and was dead.

They buried him near the river and then left, paddling night and day till they reached the rapids. A night they spent in the village, for they were racked with sleeplessness, and they left the next morning, reaching Klagan the same day.

Such was the serang's report.

The fear spread farther down the river till it reached the sea and spread along the coast.

In the barracks that night were two women who would never see their men again ; was born a baby who would never know his father ; wept a maiden for a lover whose lips she would never kiss again.

As the earliest streaks of dawn came stealing across the sky, the chugging of a motor-boat broke the stillness of the night. Dennis himself was at the wheel, for the serang was suffering with fever. With him were nine police and a corporal. They carried stores for twenty days.

The journey was a replica of the serang's, save that at the village by the rapids no friendly headman or villagers took charge of the motor-boat. The village had fled before the fear. On the fifth day Buis was reached as the setting sun shot the sky with blood-red streamers.

On the banks of the river the earth was uprooted ; among the loosened earth were human bones and the marks of pigs' feet ; among the bones was a broken tusk, sure sign of some fierce conflict that had raged over Nuin's remains.

Dennis shuddered as he saw the scene. His Murat police, pagans from the interior of North Borneo, fingered their charms of monkeys' teeth and dried snakeskins that hung around their necks or were attached to the rotan belts around their waists that carried their heavy *parangs* (swords).

Occasionally throughout the night the droning noise of myriad insects was broken by the shrill bark of deer or kijang. Sometimes the sentry gazing into the vast blackness of the jungle saw the beady eyes of a pig lit up for a moment by the flames of the campfire. Sometimes a snake, attracted by the

glare, glided through the undergrowth, then passed on. Once or twice a nightjar cried and an owl hooted—erie sounds in the pitch-black night. Otherwise a heavy brooding stillness, like an autumn mist, crept over the jungle and enveloped the camp. Hardly a policeman slept, but dozed and waked and dozed and waked again, only to wake once more and feel the fear grow ever stronger. Dennis, on his camp bed under a *kajang* awning, tossed and tossed the long night through.

Dawn broke to a clap of thunder. Rain heralded in the new day.

'Three days—west.' This was all Dennis knew; all he had to guide him. For this and the next two days the party followed a track that led steadily in a westerly direction. On the evening of the third day it came out into a glade. Here Dennis pitched the camp. The tiny space of open sky and glittering stars breathed a cooler air and purer fragrance than the camps roofed in by the canopy of mighty trees. Thus the tired and haunted police slept and Dennis ceased his tossing. Only the sentry was awake—or should have been. Perhaps he, too, dozed or fell fast asleep for a few unconscious moments. If so, he paid a heavy penalty.

Dennis awoke the next morning at a quarter to six to see only the smouldering remains of the campfire.

'Sentry!' he called. But no answer was vouchsafed. 'Sentry!' he cried again, but no one came. Aroused by his voice, the sleeping camp stirred to wide and startled awakeness.

The corporal came across to Dennis, saluted, then stood at attention, waiting.

'The fire's nearly out; where's the sentry?' Dennis queried.

The corporal looked around him, gazed at the smouldering fire, counted his men, then looked at Dennis with fear-stricken eyes.

'Tuan!' he gasped. 'He is not here—there are only eight men.'

'Is not? What d'you mean? Where's he gone?' As Dennis snapped his questions, cold fear gripped his heart. He knew: some inner sense told him that the man had disappeared in the same mysterious fashion as those early victims. Here in the

midst of the camp the terrible unseen thing had power!

'Where's he gone?' Dennis repeated his question fiercely to quench his rising fear. 'What do you mean?'

For answer the corporal only stood and trembled. His open, twitching mouth produced no sound.

With an oath, Dennis flung himself from his bed. 'Search the glade, you fool,' he cried, 'and find his tracks. He can't be far away. No, stay,' he added, as the corporal was departing. 'Who is it?'

'Bensaian, tuan,' gasped the terrified man.

Dennis's eyes narrowed and a frown spread over his forehead.

'Bensaian!' he repeated. 'He was number three. His watch was from 12 till 2.'

'Tuan!'

'Then he's never been relieved. From 2 o'clock at least, he's been missing.'

'Tuan! I must have slept. I saw Auraner relieve Si Tuah, but I was tired and—'

'Search for his tracks,' Dennis cried, breaking in on his protestations, 'but see no man enters the jungle.'

In that tiny glade the search was no prolonged affair, but no traces of the missing man were found—save one. A brass button, torn from his tunic, lay at the foot of a mighty billian tree. But where and how he had gone remained a mystery. Only the regular footprints as he had walked to and fro on his beat were just discernible, and these crossed and recrossed each other in hopeless confusion.

Over the tops of the trees, the sun came stealing, bathing the glade in its warming light, but Dennis heeded it not.

'Three days—west.' The words kept hammering in his brain as he sat on the edge of his bed and smoked cigarette after cigarette. Up and down the glade a sentry walked. Round the fire the police were crouched, cooking their rice. Over another, Dennis's 'boy' prepared his own breakfast.

At length, when ready, he brought it over to him, poured out his coffee and departed to join the whispering police. But though the coffee grew cold and flies settled on the food, Dennis

sat on, unmoved, deep in his distraction.

This was the fourth day! For three days they had journeyed west, following Nuin's almost unconscious words. The glade was hemmed in by the impenetrable jungle; no path led out of it save that along which they had come. It formed a cul-de-sac indeed. And Bensaian was missing!

As Dennis sat and smoked, the one great fact became predominant. Bensaian was missing. Then what did it mean? Only that here the thing had happened, lived or breathed or moved about. Here, then, would be found the answer to the riddle. In this little glade of sunlight they must watch and wait. Into the trackless jungle he dared not enter, even if his men could hack a path. To return the way they had come would make his errand worse than fruitless. Watching and waiting alone remained.

So they waited. Day turned to evening and evening into night. The dawn of another day displaced the night. The sun again rode over the tops of the jungle. But nothing happened. Only the policemen grew more frightened. Only Dennis's nerves grew more frayed. Then once again the night descended, but no one in the camp dared really sleep.

Up and down walked the sentry, resting every now and then as he turned, against the billian tree. A gentle breeze stirred the branches of the encircling trees, bearing on the air a faint aromatic smell that soothed the nervous senses of the resting camp as a narcotic dispels pain. One by one the police ceased whispering and gently dozed, calmed by the sweet fragrance. Dennis ceased his endless smoking, stretched himself at ease upon his bed. The sense of mystery seemed forgotten by all; a sense of peace seemed brooding over them.

Midnight came, and the wakeful sentry was relieved. His relief, but half awake, railed at his fate—the half-unconscious dozing was so pleasant, and this marching up and down the glade while others rested was so utterly to his distaste.

As for the fortieth time he turned about at the base of the great billian tree, he lowered his rifle, rested for a few seconds with his hands upon the barrel, then leaned against the dark

ridged stem ; just for a moment he would rest, his rifle in his hands—just for a moment only, then once again take up his beat.

The wind in the trees was gradually increasing ; the fragrance on the air became more pronounced. The camp was almost rapt in slumber. On his bed, Dennis sleepily wondered whence came the pleasing, soothing odour that seemed to breathe so wondrous a peace. Against the billian tree the sentry still was leaning, but his rifle slipped from the faint grasp of his hands and he heeded not the rattle as it struck the ground.

Peace in the glade from whence came so much mystery! Peace while the dread, though unknown, agent drew near apace!

Down from the top of the billian tree it slowly descended, branch by branch ; slowly, carefully, silently, till it rested on the lowest branch, still thirty feet above the sentry.

The bark of a deer broke the stillness of the night. From afar came an answering note. Somehow the sound wakened the sentry. He looked around him, saw the fire was burning bright, picked up his fallen rifle and began to walk about.

Down the far side of the tree a bark rope descended till its weighted end just rested on the ground. Down the rope a man, naked save for a bark-made loin cloth, descended till he, too, reached the earth. Then, pressed flatly to the great tree's trunk, he waited.

Across the glade, the sentry turned about. With listless, heavy steps he was returning. Nearer and nearer he approached. At the foot of the billian tree he halted, turned and leaned against the trunk. The tension of his limbs relaxed. The rifle slipped from his grasp, but hung suspended by the strap that had become entangled over his arm. A light unconsciousness, hardly to be designated as sleep, stole over him. From the camp there was no sign of wakefulness.

Slowly a figure crept noiselessly round the tree and stood staring at the policeman. Naked indeed he was, save for the bark loin cloth ; his thick black hair hung over his neck and reached out beyond his shoulders, framing a face out of which gleamed two fanatical shining eyes. His body to the waist was

covered with tattoo. From each of his breasts the designs started, spreading to the waist-line and round to the back. The nipple of each breast gleamed a fiery burnished gold, while from their fringe spread outward like a full-blown flower five opal petals of wondrous purple hue. From the golden centre of each flower ten long pistils spread, curving downwards and round his body. At their source they too were of a purple hue, but as they reached the petals their colour turned to gleaming gold which slowly changed to glistening silver as their ridged ends were reached. These ridged ends were circular and their silver rims flamed brilliant scarlet mouths, shaped like the sucking orifice with which the huge and slimy horse-leech gluts its loathsome thirst for blood.

The man's arms were unusually long : his fingernails had never been clipped ; the splay of his toes, especially between the big and the next one, uncommonly wide.

One hand still clutched the bark rope ; the other hung loosely at his side. Though he was tall, standing five feet ten inches, and heavily built, he moved as lightly as a cat.

Lightly he let the rope go and extended his two long arms towards his unconscious prey. The cry of a nightjar sounded close at hand. The somnolent sentry stirred as the sound just reached his brain. With a spring the man was upon him. One hand upon his mouth, one arm around his chest, pinioning his arms to his side. With a swiftness incredible, he reached the far side of the tree, let go his grasp upon the sentry's mouth and, using the rope as a rail, commenced to climb step over step with an amazing agility.

*'Tolong!' (Help.)* The cry, laden with overwhelming fear, rent the stillness of the night. *'Tol—'*

All further sound ended in a gurgle as the relentless pressure round the sentry's body squeezed out all breath. The camp, at that sudden cry of human fear and agony, awoke to life. Instinctively the police seized their rifles ; the corporal blew fiercely on his whistle ; Dennis hurriedly pulled on his mosquito boots and picked up his revolver from under his pillow.

*'Corporal!'*

*'Tuan!'*

*'Siapa itu?' (Who's that?)*

The cries rent the air simultaneously. Then came silence for the fraction of a second as everyone stared hopelessly at one another as they realized the glade was empty of the sentry.

'Si Tuah! Tuah!' Dennis's voice rose in a long cry, breaking the sudden silence that followed the camp's awakening. 'Tu-ah!' he called again.

Somewhere from among the trees came a sound—a sort of muffled sob—a choking, gurgling cry of fear. To the edge of the jungle close to the billian tree, Dennis and the corporal hurried.

'Look, *tuan!* A rope!' the latter gasped.

'My God!' whispered Dennis. 'What does it mean?'

'It's made of bark and——' began the corporal, but the rest of his words were drowned by a loud report.

*'Jaga! tuna, jaga!'* (look out) he cried, as a jumbled shape came hurtling down from the branches of the tree and the frayed ends of the rope came writhing about them. The snapping of a twig overhead, and a smoking rifle fell at their feet.

As the shape reached the ground with a sickening thud, two figures fell apart and then lay still.

'Seize that man and hold him,' Dennis cried, pointing to the naked figure as he bent over the prostrate form of Si Tuah. 'Gently, men, gently,' he added, as four police picked him up and carried him over to their shelter.

His left arm hung loosely by his side, two ribs were also broken, but his heart still faintly beat. Dennis poured a little brandy down his throat. Slowly Si Tuah came to. He tried to rise to a sitting posture, but fell back with a groan.

'He came upon me from behind the tree—I must have dozed,' he muttered. 'He picked me up—the pressure of his grasp was awful—and then began to climb the tree, holding the rope as a rail and walking up step by step. I struggled—just as we neared the branches his grip slackened—I could not cry—I had no breath—I only groaned. I struggled once again—my foot kicked the butt of my rifle—my toe found the trigger and I pressed and pressed—there came a report—we fell—and——'

Si Tuah had fainted again. Dennis's eyes met those of the corporal. 'The shot must have severed the rope,' he whispered.

'Tuan, his *nasib* (fate) was good,' the corporal answered, and they crossed to where the human vulture lay, one leg twisted under him, his *chawat* all awry. As the policemen rolled him over on his face to knot the ropes—they showed but little pity for his unconscious state—his *chawat* came undone and slipped from his waist.

'Look, *tuan*, look,' the corporal gasped, and pointed with shaking finger. 'Look—it has a tail—it's not a man—it has a tail!' and feverishly he fingered the charms that hung round his neck.

Dennis looked, following the pointing finger, then, bending down, looked long and closely. It was as the corporal said. The man possessed a tail—a long, hard protuberance that projected from his spine for about four inches.

'Bring him to the camp,' he ordered. 'Place two sentries—one over him, one over the camp. He is only stunned; there are no bones broken. In the morning when Tuah's better we'll learn something more.'

Dennis walked across to his bed. The fear was gone, but the mystery was still unexplained. The campfire burnt brightly, giving out a smell of pungent woodsmoke. The soothing, aromatic scent of an hour ago was no more. From the police came intermittent whisperings; from the man with the tail, naught but heavy breathing. On his bed, Dennis tossed and wondered.

As the early dawn first faintly flooded the sky, shriek upon shriek rent the air. Tuah had become delirious. The man with the tail awoke and listened. From a group of police squatting over the fire, their voices reached him. His eyes blinked in perplexity. Quietly as he lay, he dug with his nails a small round hole in the earth about five inches deep. Then gingerly he moved and, in spite of his bonds, sat up. From his bed, Dennis watched him. Into the hole he fitted his tail, then looked at his bonds and the group of police. He opened his mouth, but no sound came forth. His tied hands he stretched out to them. His face

expressed a yearning. It was as if their voices brought comfort or recalled a past. Then tear after tear rolled down his cheeks.

Calling the corporal, Dennis crossed to the weeping man. At Dennis's approach he looked up, then, with a cry, buried his face in his bound hands and rocked his body to and fro. He was afraid—afraid of a white man, the like of which he had never seen before.

'Peace, fool!' the corporal said roughly, speaking unconsciously in Murut. 'Stop your wailing; the *tuan* is no ghost, but a man, albeit all-powerful.'

Slowly the tailed man ceased his weeping and sat up. 'A man!' he muttered. 'A man and the colour of the gods!' He spoke a bastard Murut and Malay that caused Dennis to start and the corporal to frown in perplexity, for his meaning was clear, though many of his words, though akin to either language, were yet unlike either. But they understood him.

'And your name?' Dennis asked in Malay, but the being only shook his head in supplication, extending his hands.

'Loosen his bonds,' Dennis commanded. 'Ask him his name, his tribe and village.'

The corporal obeyed and then translated.

The man's name was Si Urag. He came of a Murut race that years ago had captured some Malay traders. All had been killed except the women. These had been made to marry the headmen. Then came a plague and nearly all died. The remnants, according to custom, moved their village. For days and days they walked in the trackless jungle. Then from the trees they were attacked by a race of dwarfs who lived in houses in the branches. All save him were killed. He lay stunned; when he recovered consciousness he saw that the dwarfs had tails and that they were disembowelling the dead and hanging their entrails round their necks. Fear seized him. He tried to rise and run away. He staggered to his feet, tottered a yard or two, and then collapsed. Terrified, face downwards, he waited for his foes. With a rush of feet they came. He waited for the blows. They never fell. Suddenly he felt a gentle pull on his tail—the tail over which all his life he had been ridiculed; then came a

muttering of voices. From the face of the moon a cloud passed by. He was in a glade and lying near a pool. Over the air a heavy scent was hanging. Suddenly the waters stirred. Out of their depths a flaming gold and purple flower arose. Ten tentacles spread out with gaping, wide-open, blood-red mouths. Shriek upon shriek of utter agony rent the air. Into the flaming golden centre, each tentacle, curving inward, dropped a dwarf. Into the depths of the pool the flower sank down. All was still. Si Urag was alone.

That night he slept in a house among the branches of a tree. The surviving dwarfs had fled.

In the morning he collected the corpses of his friends and placed them near the lake. That night from his tree-house he watched. The moon was one day off the full. When at its highest point in the sky, the waters of the pool became disturbed. Again the golden purple flower arose from its depths and the soothing scent spread over the jungle. Again the red-mouthed tentacles spread over the shore and sucked up the corpses, curved themselves in towards the golden centre, dropped in its bell-shaped mouth the stiffened bodies. Once again the human-feeding flower sank beneath the waters. Once again all was still. Gradually the narcotic smell grew less; slowly the moon sank in the west. All was dark and silent.

On the next and the two following nights the flower appeared. Each night the hungry tentacles sought for food—human or animal. Then with the waning of the moon the flower rose up no more. Still in his tree-house, Si Urag watched and lived. Where else was he to go? His tribe was killed; the dwarfs had fled, and of them he was afraid. On account of his tail, he was too shy to intermingle with other humans, even if he knew where to find them. Here was his house, safe from wild beasts that roamed at night; in the pool were many fish, in the jungle many roots and fruit. Here was the wondrous flower that fed on men, that spread its wondrous scent, to whom he felt he owed his life. Here, then, he would live and consecrate his life in a kind of priesthood to the flaming gold and purple orchid.

The corporal ceased and his eyes met those of Dennis. There

was no need to answer the unspoken question in them. The mystery of those disappearances was explained.

'And that?' Dennis pointed to the tattooing on the prisoner's body.

Si Urag understood the gesture, if not the words.

'Is the picture of the flower I serve,' he said, looking at the corporal. 'Two nights ago I fed it with a man clothed like this'—and he pointed to the police. 'A night ago I caught a pig and a deer. Last night I caught a man'—he pointed to where Si Tuah lay in his delirium, 'but magic spoke from out of a tube that flashed fire and the rope was severed and——' He shrugged his shoulders, with a world of meaning, then, 'I am hungry; give me some rice,' he begged.

For a while he ate his fill. Then, when the sun rose high over the little glade, Dennis questioned him further, and from his answers formed a great resolve.

The glade of the golden-purple flower was but a few miles away. A little cutting of the jungle and a hidden path—Si Urag's path—would be found. That night the moon would be but two days past its zenith; the wondrous flower would rise for the last time for a month—or rise never to rise again, hoped Dennis.

Si Urag was complacent. Was it fear or cunning? Who could tell? His face was like a mask as he agreed to lead the little party to the pool where dwelt the sacred flower.

The hour was after midnight. In the camp, three police watched the delirious Si Tuah. Along a narrow track that led from the jungle to a pool, silently stole eight men. In the west a clipped moon was slowly sinking. Out of the jungle crept the men, into a glade silvered by the light of the moon.

'To the right ten paces ex——' Dennis's whispered orders faded away, giving place to a breathless gasp of surprise. There in the middle of the pool was a great golden-purple flower, its centre flaming, its petals deepest purple, its ten pistils curling and waving about—curling and waving towards the little group of men as they emerged from the track, the blood-red, silver-rimmed mouths opening and shutting in hungry expectation. Over the glade lay the heavy aromatic scent.

Speechless, spellbound, the little party looked at the wondrous, beautiful sight. The deadening spell of that narcotic scent was spreading through their veins. Lower and lower slowly sank the moon.

Si Urag fell upon his knees, covered his face with his hands and commenced to mumble a prayer. His action jerked the rope with which he was attached to Dennis and the corporal. With a start the former awoke as from a trance. All the waving pistils were pointing and stretching towards the huddled group. The moon was nearly touching the farther edge of the sky. Soon—soon—

'To the right, ten paces extend!' Like pistol shots, Dennis's words broke in on the night. Unconsciously, automatically, the police obeyed. Si Urag remained in prayer. 'Load!' The one word cut the stillness like a knife. The waving pistils changed their curves—followed the extending men, stretched and strained their blood-red mouths.

'At point-blank—fire!' Six tongues of flame; one loud and slightly jagged report. Four pistils writhed and twisted in an agony of death. In the flaming golden centre, a jagged hole. The heavy aromatic scent came stealing stronger and stronger from the maimed and riddled centre. The moon just touched the far horizon. Slowly the wondrous flower began to sink, the waters became disturbed, the pistils seemed to shrink.

Si Urag rose from his knees and prayers; uncovered his ears, over which he had placed his hands at the sound of the report. From Dennis to the corporal he looked in mute and utter supplication. From head to foot he trembled.

Slowly the moon and the flower were sinking. One pistil, bigger, stronger, fuller-mouthed than the rest, seemed reluctant to retreat, but pointed and waved at the silent three.

Into his *chawat*, Si Urag dived his hand. Quick as lightning he withdrew it. A slash to the right, another to the left, and he was free. A mighty spring, a piercing cry, and he hurled himself, as a devotee, into the great, ravenous, blood-red mouth. Slowly the pistil curved inward. Over the golden bell-shaped centre it

poised. Then it bent its head. Its silver rim distended and then closed. Si Urag was no more.

The moon sank down out of sight ; the wondrous flower, with its maddened, fanatical victim, slipped beneath the waters of the pool. The stillness of the jungle remained ; the scent of dew-laden earth arose. Darkness—and a memory—surrounded the group of seven.

The tropic sleepiness of 3 p.m. hung over Klagan. Suddenly the chugging of a motor-boat was heard coming from afar upstream. Down to the tiny floating wharf the populace descended, headed by the serang. Round the last bend swung the motor-boat, drew alongside the wharf and came to rest. Out of it silently stepped Dennis and the weary police. One of them carried two rifles, which told the wondering people of a death. Two of them supported Si Tuah, which told them a struggle had taken place. Over his features spread a smile as his hands met those of his wife. ' 'Twas a near thing, Miang,' he murmured, ' and it happened at dead of night. A man with a tail and a golden-purple orchid that he worshipped.'

From the people rose a gasp of wonder and cries of disbelief. Then Dennis raised his hand.

'Si Tuah speaks the truth,' he said, 'but Si Urag of the Tail no longer lives and the flower no more can blossom. The fear is dead.'

Then, unsteadily, he walked to his house.

# THE METRONOME

AUGUST W. DERLETH

AS SHE lay in bed, with the pleasant, concealing darkness all around her, her lips were half parted in a smile, the only expression of her tremendous relief that the funeral was over at last. And no one had suspected that she and the boy had not fallen into the river accidentally, no one had guessed that she could have saved her stepchild if she had wanted to. 'Oh, poor Mrs. Farwell, how terrible she must feel!' She could hear their words ringing faint and far away in the close-pressing darkness of the night.

What remorse she had felt when the child had at last gone down, when he had disappeared beneath the surface of the water for the last time, and when she herself lay exhausted on the shore, had long since passed from her. She had ceased to think how she could have done this thing—she had even convinced herself that the river bank had caved in accidentally, that she had forgotten how weak it was there and how deep the water below, and how swift the current.

In the next room her husband moved. He, poor automaton, suspected nothing. 'Now I have only you,' he had said to her, sorrow in the worn lines of his face. It had been difficult for her those first few days, but the definite consignment of Jimmy's body to the grave had lessened and finally dissipated the faint doubts that haunted her.

Still thinking soberly, it was difficult for her to conceive how she could have done it. Impulsive it was, certainly, but irritation

at the boy, and hatred because of his resemblance to his mother, had fostered her design. And that metronome. At ten years old a boy should have forgotten such childish things as a metronome. If he had played the piano and needed it to keep time, that would have been a different thing. (Would it? she questioned herself.) But as it was—no, it was too much for her. Her nerves couldn't have stood it another day. And when she had hidden the metronome, how he enraged her by singing that absurd little ditty which he had heard Walter Damrosch sing in explanation of the nickname *Metronome Symphony* for Beethoven's Eighth on one of those Friday morning children's hour programmes. The words of it, those absurdly childish words which Beethoven had sent to the inventor of the metronome, ran through her mind, ringing irritatingly in the chambers of her memory:

How d'you do,  
How d'you do,  
How d'you do,  
My dear, my dear  
Mis-ter Mel-zo!

or something like that. She could not be sure of them. They rang insistently in her memory to the melody of the second movement of the Eighth, beating like the metronome, tick-tick, tick-tick, endlessly. The metronome and the song had after all crystallized her feeling for the son of Farwell's first wife.

She thrust the song from her memory.

Then abruptly she began to wonder where she had hidden the metronome. It was rather a pretty thing, quite modern, with a heavy silver base and a little hammer on a grooved steel rod extending upward against the background of a curved triangle of silver. She had not yielded to her first impulse to destroy it because she had thought that after the boy was gone (had she seen him lying dead already then?) it would make a lovely ornament, even though it had belonged to Jimmy's mother. For a moment she thought of Margot, who ought to be glad that she

had sent Jimmy to his mother—providing that there was a place beyond. She remembered that Margot had believed.

Could she have put the thing on one of the shelves in her closet? Perhaps. It was odd that she could not remember something which still stood out as one of her most important acts in the last few days preceding Jimmy's drowning. Or she might have put it behind some of the books in the library.

She lay thinking about it, thinking how attractive it would look on the grand piano, just that single ornament, silver against the piano's brownish black.

And then suddenly the ticking of the metronome broke into her ruminations. How odd, she thought, that it should sound just now, while her thoughts dwelt upon it. The sound came quite clearly, tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick. But when she tried to ascertain the direction of the sound, she could not. It seemed to swell, growing louder, and fading away again, which was most unusual. She reflected that she had never known it to do that before in all the time Jimmy had plagued her with its ticking. She became more alert, listened more intently.

Abruptly she thought of something that sent an apprehensive thrill coursing through her. For a moment she held her breath, suspended her faculties. Didn't she hide the metronome after Jimmy had given it her to wind? Unless her memory failed her, she did. And then it could not now be ticking, for it had been run down, and it had not been wound up again, and it was frightfully difficult to wind the thing up. For a fleeting moment she wondered if Henry had found it and wound it for a joke and set it going at this hour. She glanced at her wrist-watch. A quarter to one. It required a far stretch of imagination to believe Henry capable of such a joke. More likely he would confront her with his find and say, 'Look here, I thought you told me Jimmy'd lost this, and here I find it on your shelf; he couldn't possibly have reached there.'

She listened.

*Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick.*

Did Henry hear that, she wondered. Probably not. He slept quite soundly always.

After a moment's hesitation, she got up, groped about in the dark for her electric candle, and went to the closet. She opened the door, thrust her hand and the candle into the yawning maw of darkness disclosed, and listened. No, the metronome was not there. Yet she could not help pulling aside one or two hat boxes to be sure. She almost always hid things there.

She withdrew from the closet and stood leaning against its closed door, her brow marred by a frown of discontent. Good God, was she destined to hear that infernal ticking even after Jimmy's death? She moved resolutely to the door of her room.

But suddenly a new sound struck into her consciousness.

Someone was walking about beyond the door somewhere, padding about on soft, muffled feet!

Her first thought was naturally enough of Henry, but even as the thought occurred to her she heard his bed creak. She wanted to imagine that for some reason the maid or the cook had returned to the house, but could not accept the absurdity of their returning for anything at one o'clock in the morning.

Her hands hesitated on the knob. Instinct warned: 'Don't go out; not beyond the door.'

She opened the door almost angrily, and looked into the hall, holding the electric candle high above her. There was nothing there.

How too absurd! she thought.

At the same time she heard the footsteps again, slight and far away now, sounding faintly from downstairs. The ticking of the metronome had become more insistent; so loud was it that for a frantic moment she was afraid it might wake Henry.

And then came a sound that flooded her being with icy terror—the sound of a little boy's voice singing in a far place:

How d'you do,  
How d'you do,  
How d'you do,  
My dear, my dear  
Mis-ter Mel-zo!

She fell back against the door jamb and clung there with her free hand. Her mind was in turmoil. But in a moment the voice faded and died away, and the ticking of the metronome sounded louder than ever. She felt only relief as she heard its sound superseding that of the other.

She stood for a few moments pulling herself together. Then she tightened her fingers about the electric candle and went slowly along the corridor, pressing herself close to the wall. As she approached the top of the stairs, she clasped her other hand about the small tube of light, so that whatever was below might not see.

She descended the stairs, apprehensive lest they creak and betray her progress.

There was nothing in the hall below.

Gently she pushed open the door of the library, and the sound of the metronome welled out and engulfed her. She did not at once see beyond the threshold. Only after she had stepped into the room did her eyes catch sight of the vague little shadow against the opposite wall, an indistinct thing wandering along the line of the wall, peering behind furniture, looking upward at the bookcases, reaching fantom hands into corners—Jimmy, looking for his metronome!

She stood immobile, her very breath held within her, it seemed, by some impending horror. Jimmy, dead Jimmy, whom she had seen buried that morning! Only the strength of her will saved her from pitching forward in a faint.

On came the spectral child. Towards her it came, and past her it went, searching, prying into every nook where the metronome might be hidden. Around again and again.

With a great effort she found her voice. 'Go away,' she whispered harshly. 'Oh, go away!'

But the child did not hear. It continued its phantom quest, futilely covering the same ground it had covered many times. And the insistent tick-tick, tick-tick of the metronome continued to sound like the strokes of a hammer in the oppressive night-haunted room.

Her hand slipped from the tube of light as the child passed

her. She saw its face turned up towards her, its eyes—usually so kind—malevolent, its mouth petulant and angry, its little hands clenched. Frantically she turned to escape.

But the door would not open.

After three futile attempts to wrench it open, she looked for some obstacle to its movement. The child was at her side, holding its hand lightly against the door, its touch enough to keep the door immovable. She tried once again. The knob turned in her hand, as before, but the door refused to move. The expression on the child's face had become so malignant that she dropped the electric candle in sudden fright and fled backward toward the window directly opposite the door.

But the child was there before her.

She tried to raise the window, slipping the lock with her free hand. It would not move. Even before she looked, she felt the child's hand holding down the window. There it was, vaguely white, transparent, leaning lightly against the glass.

She fled.

It was the same with the other window the room contained. When she tried to raise her hand to break the glass she found that the child had only to stand before the window and her hand could not even penetrate through the atmosphere to the glass.

Then she turned and slipped into the dark corner behind the grand piano, sobbing in terror.

Presently the child was there. She felt it emanating a ghastly cold that penetrated her thin night-clothes.

'Go away, go away!' she sobbed.

She felt the child's face pressing close to hers, its eyes seeking hers, its eyes accusing her, its phantom fingers reaching out to touch her.

With a wild cry of terror, she fled.

Once again she made for the door, but the child was there before her hand descended to the knob. And she knew without turning the knob that her effort was in vain. Then she tried to snap on the light, but the same influence that had prevented her from breaking the window was again at work.

Once more she sought the comparative safety of a dark corner.

And again the child found her out and nuzzled close to her like an animal.

From corner to corner she ran.

But the child was everywhere.

Then suddenly the gates of her mind pressed inward and collapsed, and she felt a deeper, maddening fear invading her reason. She began to beat at the enclosing walls with her clenched fists. Then she found her voice and screamed to release the horror that hemmed her in.

The last thing she knew was the pulling of the child's spectral hands at her waist. Then she collapsed in a heap against the wall. Something struck her a sharp blow against the temple and at the same instant the clammy frigidity of the child's phantom body pressed down upon her face.

Henry Farwell found his wife lying against the wall near the grand piano. Close to her head lay the metronome, which he saw at a glance had fallen from behind an enormous landscape now hanging awry above her, and in falling had struck her left temple.

She was dead.

For a stunned second he stared at her body. Then his methodical, well-ordered business mind asserted itself and he went to call the coroner.

When the coroner came, he met him at the door.

'A dreadful accident has happened,' he said. 'My wife was evidently walking in her sleep and ran against the wall, when a metronome, hidden by my boy some time before his death, fell and struck her temple. She's dead. She's in there.'

Then Henry Farwell wisely sat down, for the shock of her death was beginning to penetrate even his deliberately icy calm. He folded his hands and waited for the coroner to finish.

In a few minutes the coroner came from the library, looking very grave indeed.

'Look here, Farwell,' he said, 'I don't understand this.' And without waiting for Henry Farwell's questions, he went on. That

blow wasn't enough to kill her. It looks as if she'd been suffocated by—yes, by damp, wetish rags—but there isn't anything like that in here. And I don't see how your boy could have hidden that metronome behind that picture. It's much too high for him to have reached even from a chair or the top of the piano. And there's something else that puzzles me. Come along, please.'

They went into the library together.

'Look at that,' said the coroner, pointing, his extended finger encircling the room at the line of wall and floor.

There were a large number of tiny footprints along the wall, wet and glistening in the light that flooded the room.

'Like a boy with wet feet,' said Farwell, his voice reluctant. 'Looks as if he'd been paddling around in the water, doesn't it?' he added.

'No, no,' said the coroner, in a strained voice. 'Like a boy who'd been thoroughly wetted, clothes and all.' He got down on his knees, put on his glasses, and said, 'See, drops—like water dripping from wet clothes. They follow all along the line of the footprints. And look, these queer little digressions from the path—into corners—behind things. Farwell, I frankly don't understand this!'

And Henry Farwell, in whom Nature had forgotten to leave a grain of imagination, said, 'Nor can I, Doctor. I know only what I told you.'

# OFFSPRING OF HELL

H. THOMSON

THE nearer Professor Windford approached his destination, the less comfortable he felt about it all. A long-expected invitation from his friend Count Norlasky, accepted with alacrity within the cheerful precincts of a London club, was assuming a very different aspect among the lonely surroundings of an Austrian countryside. Not that Windford had any wish to draw back; for he had in secret been nursing the possibility of this adventure for many years—since, in fact, when scarcely out of his teens, he had first taken up the study of alchemy with a view to elucidating occult mysteries. Then it was he formed a friendship with the count, who, working with a similar object, confided to Windford his ambition to drive from his ancestral home the malevolent spirits that for several generations had made the castle impossible for his family to inhabit.

The silence, broken only by the rumbling of the old-fashioned chaise and the resounding hooves of the ancient horse plodding slowly up the mountain pass, oppressed him. Through the ill-fitting windows, that rattled incessantly with every conceivable irregularity of the road, he looked on the off side over a precipice where, hundreds of feet below, stretched a limitless plain. And from the forests covering it, as yet untouched by man and extending as far as the eye could see, came the distant howl of wolves. On the near side arose an overhanging wall of rock, projecting here and there so far into the road as scarce to leave room for the carriage to pass. Ahead, the stockily built coach-

man hunched on the box obscured most of the outlook, and not until the narrow way suddenly broadened into a plateau and the vehicle drew up in front of a gloomy building did Windford realize his tedious journey had at last come to an end.

Carrying a light suitcase—his heavier luggage having been left behind in the tumbledown shed that served as a railway station in the valley below—Windford alighted at the entrance and proceeded to pull the rusty bell-chain he found half buried in the ivy-covered wall. The driver, showing no further interest in his passenger, whipped up his tired horse and disappeared.

Getting no response to his ring, Windford stepped back a few paces and looked round. He then realized the building was little more than a ruin. Set on the summit of a mountain, a spot eminently suited for defence, and standing in extensive grounds that sloped steeply towards the edges of the cliffs, the castle had doubtless at one time been an important feature of the countryside. Roughly rectangular in design, its shrub-covered walls standing out against the evening sky could be seen to merge at their four corners into square-shaped towers. Of these towers, only the one opposite him looked even passably habitable.

Filled with a sense of loneliness, he returned to the entrance and rang again. An answer came in the sound of approaching footsteps, and through the slit-like apertures serving for windows on each side of the doorway, the glimmer of a light appeared. A key grated in the lock and the massive door, creaking painfully on its rusty hinges, was slowly opened. Dimly outlined in the semi-darkness, his stooping shoulders and disproportionate length of arm giving him something of an ape-like appearance, an old man raised his lantern shoulder-high and peered inquisitively into the visitor's face. Seemingly satisfied, he uttered a guttural exclamation accompanied by a sign to enter.

Stepping over the threshold, Windford found himself at one end of a long and bare stone hall. At the other end, to which his guide, after carefully relocking the door, led him, a large wood fire was burning—the first sign of any comfort about the place Windford had seen. For illumination, a few tallow candles

sufficed. Of furniture, a trestle table, hewn roughly out of oak, and a couple of clumsily constructed chairs, of the high back 'grandfather' type, were the only pieces. On the table was an unappetizing loaf of black bread. Taking a stew-pot off the fire, the old man poured out a bowlful of broth which he signified Windford should drink.

Unable to understand the language, Windford was completely at a loss to account for the nature of his reception and the count's absence. Obeying the signs made to him, he drew a chair up to the table and began to eat. The meal was not one to tempt him to linger long, and after a few mouthfuls he pushed the plate aside with a gesture that he had finished. Thereupon the old man, who had been watching him from a little distance, advanced to the table and, taking a letter from the pocket of his cloak, he handed it over with an obsequious bow.

Moving his chair in order to get the benefit of the firelight, Windford broke the seal and withdrew the contents. The writing was the count's though scarcely recognizable compared with the clear hand in which Windford's invitation had been couched a few days ago. Difficult to make out, in some parts the sentences were indecipherable.

'My dear friend' (it read),

'Since I wrote to you to assist me in my final efforts to destroy the powers of Black Magic to which both of us have devoted much time to unravelling the secrets, events have moved quickly. At the time the letter was written, my efforts had already met with so much success that I verily believed I was about to expunge for ever those evil spells that for so long have made the home of my ancestors impossible to live in. By taking scrupulous care to follow the directions laid down in the mediaeval work on witchcraft which a lucky chance enabled me to find in one of the disused family tombs, I discovered that instead of having to expose myself to their combined attacks, I possessed the power to call up and combat the different grades of evil in turn. By this plan, beginning with the highest evolutionary types—the werewolves—I worked successfully down-

wards until only the elementals remained. Of these, devoid as they are of the cunning of the more highly organized orders, destruction, as you are aware, depends less on the incantations of the philosopher than on methods of alchemy. And there, knowing your profound knowledge of that subject, I should have awaited your help. But over-confidence bred from previous success unfortunately led me on.

'Last night, when the moon was at its full, the time for renewing the struggle seemed ripe. I had scarcely finished my arrangements in the haunted chamber and placed my potions in the order in which they would be required when the seance began. Never before had I felt the atmosphere so tense with evil. Peals of hideous laughter rent the air and nauseating odours filled it. Undeterred, I worked on steadily by the book, and before long I had the satisfaction of knowing I was making headway. Wails of disappointed furies grew gradually fainter. Electric-like shocks, to which my body had been subjected earlier in the evening, became less violent. The odious smells began to fade away, and between them and myself I could feel arising a purer atmosphere. Overjoyed at my success, I poured contents from phial after phial into the seething cauldron, according to the directions laid down in the book. And finally, on the tick of the appointed second, the contents of the last bottle went into the bowl. Spellbound with eager expectation, I confidently awaited the result. Then suddenly my heart sank. For instead of the sudden diffusion of energy I had been led to expect, the fiercely effervescing fluid simmered down and ended in nothing more than a puff of smoke that floated tamely up to the ceiling. Realizing, to my dismay, that I had made a technical error in my time calculation, I hastily endeavoured to retrieve it by a rapid repetition of the last part of the experiment. But try as I would I could not regain the ground I had lost. Every minute my defences weakened until finally they were utterly broken down. Since then I have known no peace and through the activity of my assailants I am unable to escape from the room. My servant, Karl—one of a long line of retainers who, in possessing some strange immunity, have always been able to live

in the castle unmolested and at their ease—will attend to your wants and should you try to assist me he will conduct you to me. Whether you . . . alive . . .' (From here onwards a number of words were illegible.) 'Do . . . can . . . help . . . soul . . . God . . . help . . . dying . . .'

Windford slowly folded the letter and replaced it in its envelope. For some minutes he gazed thoughtfully at the fire. Then, suddenly raising his head, he was surprised to find the old servant's eyes fixing him with a strange, malevolent stare. Instantly, on being noticed, the eyelids dropped and the countenance again took on its former expression of obsequiousness. But not so quickly that Windford had not momentarily visualized in it the mocking features of a bird against whose curved bill the reflected light of the fire had glowed red, like drops of blood. Believing the flickering shadows were playing on his nerves, for which action was the best antidote, he signed to the old man to lead the way. A long passage and a winding stair led them to a stone corridor where beams of moonlight were eerily peeping in through chinks in its long-neglected walls. At the further end was a door. There they stopped and, raising the latch, the old man opened it. Then with a low bow he pointed to the entrance and deferentially stood aside. Switching on the electric torch he was carrying in his hand, Windford stepped briskly into the room. Behind him the door closed with an ominous click and he was alone. The air struck damp and stale. The bare walls lit up by the flashlight were windowless, and across the dirt-begrimed floor rats ran silently into their holes. Through an open doorway he passed into another room, larger in size. Here a few spluttering candles joined with a smouldering fire to throw grotesque shadows on the walls and ceiling, while for the daylight a large casement window, half hidden by a tattered curtain, served. Near the middle of the room were placed a chair and table, and against the wall stood a truckle bedstead. On the table lay an open book, and by it were a cauldron and a series of phials partially filled with variously coloured fluids. On the bedstead lay the count. On

his face a great fear was depicted. His dry and tremulous lips were trying to whisper words he was unable to speak, and his hands, wandering over the bedclothes in purposeless delirium, were clutching at the unrealities of a fevered imagination. Against the head of the bed a gun of modern design was resting. One of its barrels, Windford noted, was loaded. The other, as shown by an empty cartridge case lying on the floor, had been recently discharged.

Turning to the table, Windford found everything just as the count had left it. The phials still contained plenty of fluid, and the technicalities of the ritual as described in the book offered no special difficulties. The only chance of saving the count's life appeared to lie in repeating the experiment as quickly as possible in the hope of obtaining a favourable result. Of the danger to himself in taking this course, Windford was well aware. For as soon as he set the machinery in motion, he knew he would himself become *en rapport* with the evil ones, and like the count he would at once be susceptible to their influence.

Everything depended on the coolness and accuracy with which he could carry out the job. Carefully perusing the instructions, he checked off the phials and placed them in the precise order in which they would be required. Then he replenished and lit the spirit lamp that heated the cauldron. A glance at his watch told him there were still a few more minutes to run, for the book showed that a seance could only be initiated at the stroke of every hour between sunset and sunrise. At last the right moment arrived and he poured the contents of the first phial into the heated bowl. The effect was magical. For scarcely had the last drop fallen when a sound of mocking laughter filled the room. It died away as suddenly as it had begun and, but for the heavy breathing of the sick man, all was again still. Quickly recovering from the start it gave him, Windford concentrated all his energies on the task before him. The mixture boiled fiercely. Scented vapours filled the air. Contact with the spirit world was soon established, and things ordinarily unseen now became visible to the human eye.

About the count's bed Windford saw a delicate haze, its

gossamer-like edges ballooning gently to and fro as though straining at the leash of invisible bonds. Crowded within its meshes, myriads of shadowy forms moved ceaselessly with ever-changing outlines.

At first, Windford regarded them with curiosity. Then, as all doubt of their meaning passed away, his mind was filled with fear. For in them he recognized the lowest type of elemental vampire seeking sustenance from its victim's breath.

Twisting and squirming with kaleidoscopic rapidity, the foul throng were eagerly jostling one another for vantage points around the sick man's mouth, the whole mass swaying and trembling like a jelly in the air.

He turned aside with disgust and resumed his work. During the next pause he looked up again. The mist was still there, but it had obscured the bedstead from view. Evidently, thought Windford, it must have changed its position. And as he watched he saw the angles it made with the walls were slowly changing. A cold sweat of fear broke over him as he realized suddenly the jelly-like mass was moving in his direction. Almost imperceptibly, but surely, it was getting nearer, and it could not be very long before it would reach him.

Half paralysed with terror, Windford turned to the book for help, since only by alchemy could the vampires be checked, and to err now would be as fatal for him as it had been for the count. Nor could he in any way hasten his defence, for between every step of the process a definite interval of time was apportioned. And through the count's mistake the enemy had already gained a start. With three minutes still to run before it was time to deal with the last phial, he was horror-struck to find the mist was almost upon him. A few moments more and it had reached him. Exuding a bestial odour, it slowly enveloped him in its haze, and, swarming greedily around his mouth, the malodorous clumps of slime made clammy contact with his face. To blow them little more than smoke-like consistence offered no resistance. And if by chance one were cleft in twain, the two parts took on independent lives and only helped to swell the greed of those already there.

Fifteen—ten—five seconds to run.

In one of his trembling hands Windford held the last remaining phial. With the other he tried in vain to brush aside his relentless foes. Exerting all his will-power to keep his mind clear, he fixed his eyes firmly upon his watch in readiness for the final throw.

The passing of the terminal seconds seemed an eternity, but at last the appointed moment came. Instantly he poured the fluid into the cauldron and anxiously awaited the looked-for result. For a brief second the seething mixture sizzled. Then, heaping itself into blue bubbles, it suddenly shot a tongue of flame with terrible velocity up to the ceiling. At the same moment, from all quarters of the room, Windford heard sharp explosions, and to fill the vacuum thus created a mighty wind roared down the chimney and nearly carried him off his feet. Struggling for breath, he reeled across the room and threw open the casement. A crash of thunder, following instantaneously on a flash of lightning, was succeeded by a death-like silence. Then through the open window there came a welcome blast of life-giving ozone.

A faint moan drew Windford to the count's bedside. No longer terrorized, the erstwhile tormented countenance was set in quiet repose. Then suddenly the drooping lids lifted and starting eyeballs and dilated pupils denoted the onset of a new fear. Turning his head hastily towards the window, Windford saw perched on the sill a huge crow. With wings widely outstretched, its evil eyes fixed Windford with a malevolent, hypnotic stare. Only with difficulty he broke their gaze and, seizing the gun that rested against the head of the count's bed, he rushed to the window.

Uttering a rasping croak, the bird rose heavily in flight. Sharply silhouetted against the gold-streaked sky of the breaking dawn, to a marksman of Windford's skill it offered an easy target, and, toppling helplessly over and over in the air, it fell through the dense brushwood with a heavy thud on to the ground beneath.

Anxious to assure himself of the result, Windford hurriedly

left the room to seek it. And when, after difficulty in penetrating the dense undergrowth, he at last came upon the place where the bird had fallen, he found in its stead—with upturned face the very embodiment of evil—the dead body of the servant Karl.

# THE GHOST THAT NEVER DIED

ELIZABETH SHELDON

I SUPPOSE few people will believe the story of Miriam Tromley's death, and its sequel, even today. That is why I have never told of the strange things I had seen, either at the inquest or afterwards. I might have confessed it to the police, shrieked it aloud on Broadway. Who would have believed me then? But the time is not far off when the world will know that such things can be.

I was Evelyn's stenographer for three years. It was a queer job. I guess old Parton, whose name adorned the title-page of the magazine, hardly knew how he came to be an editor. It had started as a sort of advertisement bulletin for his cereals and tinned foods; then Miriam Tromley came to be his secretary. She had been an editor on a woman's magazine. She was a nervous little woman with all sorts of half-baked talents, and the first thing old Parton knew, she had turned his biscuit literature into a magazine.

The magazine—*Mother and Child*, you must remember it!—grew larger and thicker until it needed another worker in the editorial department. Miriam Tromley had a friend who, according to her own tale, was in the hardest kind of ill-luck at the time, and she convinced stingy old Parton that *Mother and Child* needed her afflicted friend's services. That friend was Evelyn Renard. This all happened about a year before they took me on. When I arrived on the scene, Evelyn had been promoted from assistant to co-editor. When I went in answer to their

advertisement for a stenographer it was Evelyn Renard who interviewed me. I remember so well my first impression of her. She seemed to have risen hastily as I entered, and stood at her desk, ill at ease, although I was only a prospective stenographer. I felt as if she had hurriedly concealed something as I entered. I do not mean this literally—it was just the impression of something furtive about the woman herself. When you were in the room with her she did not look at you, she *watched* you like an animal ready to anticipate the movements of its enemy.

Evelyn had not a single point of beauty unless it was her too-bright, dark eyes, but she had a sort of feverish gaiety and seemed to attract certain types of men. She was almost always pleasant to the people in the office, yet I always felt something reptilian about her, and, strange to say, she had a liking for snakes instead of the revulsion most of us feel for them.

I always felt sorry for Miriam Tromley. She seemed the sort of woman that needs protection. She ought to have been married. She was not pretty and she lacked repose, a frail, faded little woman, neither young nor old. Sometimes she looked decidedly pretty. She knew twice as much as her co-editor, but she lacked assurance; whereas Evelyn Renard was a raw, shameless and brilliant faker. No one knew anything about her antecedents. She laid claim to a millionaire French-Canadian father who had lost his money in disastrous speculation.

She engaged me at an unusually small salary, but I was not in a position to be particular just then. I afterwards learnt that Evelyn had done some very efficient work reducing the salaries of the entire staff after her promotion, although she always attributed this policy to some hard-hearted power above her.

For a time I lost sight of my first disagreeable impression of her, for Evelyn, as I have said, was friendly with all the office employees and she told such pathetic stories about herself that everyone pitied her. Even hard old Parton made her work as easy as possible, while Miriam Tromley, who had an income of her own, was always responding to some dire need of Evelyn's and, incidentally, spent hours doing Evelyn's work—for which she received scant thanks.

Old Parton had had rather a fancy for Miriam Tromley at the start. At the time Evelyn appeared upon the scene, Miss Sampson says that they all thought that he would marry her, but after Evelyn came, Miriam's influence declined. She made him believe that Miriam was inefficient. It did not come about too quickly. Miriam never suspected, but no one else was much surprised when Evelyn Renard was put over her. Evelyn was then editor-in-chief. When that happened, we could all prophesy the next step, which would, of course, be the total exit of Miriam.

We all knew it but Miriam. She seemed restless and a little anxious at times, but whatever she may have feared she was never suspicious of Evelyn.

'Miss Tromley doesn't need the money,' Miss Sampson said to me one day. 'But she likes to work here. She's one of those restless women. I think the poor soul will get quite melancholy if Evelyn prizes her out of her job altogether.'

By that time I had begun to lose my sympathy with our afflicted employer. She worked us too hard, and I had seen, too, much of the inner workings of office politics.

'She'll make a grand political boss when women really get their teeth into politics,' said Miss Sampson, the day we uncovered the maternity corset graft that was going on on the woman's page.

One day when Miss Renard was ill I went to her apartment to take some dictation and afterwards she got talking. She said she was lonely. I think she was afraid to be alone. Anyway, she indulged in some of the wildest flights of fancy I ever heard from a sane person.

'One day, Miss Morton,' she said, 'I went into my room and saw myself lying on the bed. Now what do you think of that?'

I thought at the time, 'My dear madam, I'd hate to tell you what I think of it.' And I remembered by first impression that there was something uncanny about Evelyn Renard.

There was a young man named Chalmers about her in those days. I am sure I don't know what he saw in Evelyn. Perhaps it was only that her apartment was a place where he could lounge

and talk and eat. Chalmers was a babbling sort of youth. People wouldn't take him seriously for some reason, yet he was in a way a genius who did not know how to make any practical use of his gifts. But Evelyn knew how to use them. Oh, yes! He furnished her with the material for all the articles she wrote. I don't believe Evelyn ever had one idea in her life. I don't think she wanted to have one. She preferred to use her neighbour's. She liked the idea of having other people do her work for her.

It was from poor Chalmers that Evelyn got her great idea that turned *Mother and Child* into the biggest money-making proposition in the publishing business.

There were other ideas, too, that he let fall into the hothouse soil of Evelyn's mind in his loose, incessant babbling.

'Some crook will make a lot of money that way some day,' I heard him say once, and I noted the radiant furtiveness of Evelyn's eyes as she listened. I could almost hear her think 'I'll be that one!' I remembered that look last autumn when I heard of the palatial apartment she had purchased in a co-operative apartment building on Fifth Avenue. By a curious coincidence I saw Chalmers the same day looking as if he had definitely come down to the park bench plane of existence.

The next month came the exposure of the maternity corset. Of course Evelyn contrived to keep her skirts clear of it. I don't know how much old Parton was on to the mechanism of it, but, as the office boys say, 'I was wise to it' from the beginning, and I don't believe that Evelyn ever knew that I knew. If she did, what a fool she must have thought me not to have blackmailed her out of a good income with my knowledge! That is what she would have done in my place.

Occasionally I used to catch glimpses of Miriam Tromley looking worried and anchorless, coming in and out of the office. She had not been able to get another position. She used to come in to see Evelyn at times when she knew old Parton would be out. Evelyn had succeeded in making a complete breach between them. At the same time she sympathized ardently with Miriam for the injustice that had been done to her!

'Men are like that,' I heard her say one day in accents of bitter

sympathy to Miriam. 'The more you do for them, the more they expect. You poor dear! You worked yourself to death for old Parton, and this is what you get for it.'

I have never known just the nature of the crooked deal that Evelyn put over. It was an opportunity that came to her in some way through the office. Some dishonourable use that she made of inside information. She covered her tracks to the end. The trouble came because she began to be afraid that Miriam knew about it, and, as a result, to be haunted by the fear of exposure.

Miriam had come in one day while Evelyn was having a conference with an advertising man. She was obliged to go with the man into another office, leaving Miriam alone beside her desk with her papers spread out on top of it.

I think that was the beginning of her suspicion that Miriam knew what she was up to, though I knew that Miss Tromley was incapable of reading other people's letters. But Evelyn, like many people who do such things themselves, was ready to suspect others of her own proclivities.

From that day on I could see that Evelyn was afraid of Miriam. Later I knew that she hated her. I imagine that people like Evelyn Renard always hate those who have given them their start, especially when they have done their benefactor an injury in return.

Of course there was something in those papers that Evelyn had every reason to be very nervous about. I had known for some time that she had papers which she kept locked up as if she were in the secret service.

One afternoon after leaving the office I found that I had left behind a pile of manuscripts I had to read, and I went back to get them.

As I opened the door of Miss Renard's office I distinctly saw her at her desk drawing out a paper from a drawer that she always kept locked.

'Why, Miss Renard, I thought you had left long ago!' I exclaimed. As I walked in, I knocked against a pile of books and papers on the corner of a desk and they began to fall to the floor. I bent to pick them up and when I rose again—about

the space of two seconds—Miss Renard was gone. She must have slipped out of the other door, but how she managed it so noiselessly I don't know.

I told her about it the next day and while I was telling it I noticed a curious sort of glitter in her eyes—snake-like, I called it, to myself. She dismissed me and my anecdote a little shortly.

'You were day-dreaming, Miss Morton. I was in a suburban train on my way to Rue at that time yesterday—and asleep at that. I nearly went past my station.'

As it happened, I had proof afterwards that she had told me the truth, for Miss Sampson, who lives at Mount Vernon, was on the same train. But, all the same, I felt sure that Evelyn Renard was living some sort of double life, for I saw some queer goings-on in those days.

For one thing, I felt sure that she 'shadowed' Miriam Tromley. Miriam had finally found an advertising position of some sort, and did not come in so often. When she did, Evelyn's dread was most apparent. There was certainly something she was terribly afraid to have Miriam find out. Twice after dark I saw her following Miriam, always at a little distance behind her, and walking more noiselessly than you would believe a human being could walk.

One day when Miriam had left the office I caught Evelyn looking after her with an expression that actually made me shiver. She must have noticed the look on my face, for she quietly rearranged her features and said with the sweetest tone of false sympathy—one I had come to know so well:

'Dear Miss Tromley is not looking so well. Haven't you noticed it? I am really troubled about her.'

I muttered that I hadn't noticed it especially, and as our eyes met I knew with a sense of chill along my spine that the editor of *Mother and Child* wished that her former benefactor was dead.

The next day I overheard part of a conversation between them that seemed rather to give reality to Evelyn's fears, which I had taken to be just the imaginary alarms of a guilty conscience.

'You are making a mistake, Evelyn,' I heard Miriam say. 'And if I can't make you see it, I will have to take some other means of stopping it.'

Then Evelyn's voice, rasping and hard: 'Go ahead—I don't care! You needn't think that you can down me!'

That was all I heard, but enough to know that Miriam seemed to be threatening some sort of exposure and that Evelyn's mood was determined and defiant.

I did not know what it was about then. Afterwards I was able to make a shrewd guess.

The next day was the strangest of my life. Afterwards I wondered if I had lost my reason temporarily, if I had suffered from delusions, but now I understand. . . . I will tell it exactly as it happened.

In the first place it leaked out—as such things usually do—that Evelyn had hooked old Parton. They were to be married quietly the next day. It had long been a betting proposition in the office, with the odds on Evelyn's side. At least, all the women except the new flapper stenographer had bet on her.

Just before five o'clock, Miriam called in to see Evelyn and was refused. The editor's door was closed to all visitors. Something in the make-up had to be changed at the last minute and Evelyn had ordered her dinner sent in. She was going to work until she was through, she said, and short of a bomb explosion or fire in the building—so she instructed the night operator—no one was to knock on her door.

As I stood inside the street entrance pursuing an elusive nickel in the depths of my bag and capturing only innumerable pennies, I caught sight of the dismissed Miriam hanging indecisively on the outskirts of the crowd hurrying subwaywards. I remembered afterwards her bewildered, disconsolate expression, and, what I had not realized before, the peculiar indecision, the marked weakness of the face. It occurred to me that she had in some way depended on Evelyn's hard, selfish strength and that without her she was rudderless, like a lost dog without its master.

Just as I had captured my nickel and started to go, the

elevator came down and I saw Evelyn—supposedly locked up in her office at work, slip out and pass silently out to the street.

It did not surprise me. I think I always expected Evelyn to have some different purpose from the one she openly owned up to, and I should have thought nothing of it had it not been for Miriam's strange treatment of her.

Evelyn walked directly up to Miriam, but Miriam simply stared straight into her face and walked past as if she were not there at all. I don't mean that Miriam *cut* her, but that she looked—or seemed to look—directly at the spot where Evelyn stood without seeing her. Certainly Miriam must be in some disturbed state of mind for such absent-mindedness to be possible when faced by the very person she had come to see!

Miriam turned towards Fifth Avenue: Evelyn followed at a short distance and, my curiosity and apprehension now thoroughly awake, I followed them both.

Evelyn did not make any effort to overtake Miriam. She slipped quietly after her through the crowd in an eel-like way she had, so close behind that I marvelled that Miriam never once saw her. She *did* seem to have some sense of being followed. Twice she turned and looked back, but—I remembered afterwards—although the second time she caught sight of me and bowed, she never once saw Evelyn.

I followed them all the way to Miriam's apartment in Greenwich Village. She lived in a sort of studio building, an old house with dark, winding halls. And never once during that strange walk did Miriam discover that Evelyn was following her. Never once did Evelyn discover me!

At the door of her apartment, Miriam paused to let herself in, while Evelyn drew back into the shadows.

I waited further back, near the stairs. It was not long before Miriam came out again—to go to her dinner, perhaps, or to get something to cook at home. I saw Evelyn creep nearer. There was only a dim gas-jet burning far down the hall; otherwise the place was almost dark.

As Miriam stood in the doorway of her room, a pathetic little silhouette against the light, at last Evelyn went openly up to

her and spoke. At least, I *thought* she spoke, although I heard no sound. Miriam turned to look at her vaguely—without surprise. Evelyn seemed to be urging her to do something, and Miriam listened with her eyes cast down like one in thought, but she did not answer.

After a moment she turned back into her room and noiselessly Evelyn slipped through the door after her, close on her heels.

They left it open. I stood on the threshold of Miriam's apartment, uneasy and irresolute, looking at them. Still without speaking, Miriam went to the bathroom, turned on the light, took a small bottle from the medicine cabinet and picked up a glass, while silent Evelyn watched. I could see it all from where I stood. And still neither of them spoke, only the place seemed filled with the electric pulsations of Evelyn's *will*.

I saw Miriam pour the contents of the vial into a glass; then for the moment she seemed to hesitate, and in that interval Miriam seemed to grow vague and weak, while Evelyn became strong, *tall*, terrific. . . . She was advising Miriam, but it was advice that was more like a threat or a command. Even then, I did not suspect. How could I have understood? I knew nothing of these things then . . . not until Miriam raised the glass to her lips—not until it fell from her nerveless fingers and I saw her turn with a dazed face, half falling into a chair, did I realize what the glass must have contained. . . .

She saw me then; she called my name. I jumped forward just in time to save her from falling, then turned to Evelyn just as she was escaping from the room. I sprang after her and caught her wrist, but it slipped from my grasp . . . something cool and light . . . not solid . . . yet cold, with a curious indescribable coldness. . . . For a long time I could feel the sensation of it, like menthol on my hand. Then I bent over Miriam—she was totally unconscious.

I found an art student in a neighbouring studio. We got the poor woman into her bed and telephoned for a doctor, but it was too late. It was cyanide and death had been instantaneous.

And now I come to the strangest part of my story. After I got home that night, about nine o'clock, I rang up Miss Wharton, Mr. Parton's secretary, to tell her of poor Miriam Tromley's death, and learned that she had gone back to Evelyn's apartment that night at eight o'clock—old Parton had sent her because he could get no answer from her telephone—and had found her in bed in the charge of a trained nurse. The doctor had just left. It seemed that Evelyn had had some sort of seizure while working alone in her office. Miss Wharton—who had not been employed in the office very long—found the case most pathetic.

'No one knows how long she had lain there unconscious, poor soul, all alone, with no one to come to her help. The watchman found her lying beside her desk. He noticed the light and went to investigate.'

'The night watchman!' I repeated. 'Do you know what time it was?'

'No, it wasn't the night watchman. It was James. He found her just before he left, and he leaves, doesn't he, at half past six?'

Half past six! The very hour of Miriam Tromley's death. For by a curious impulse I had glanced at my wrist-watch when the doctor had dropped Miriam's hand and pronounced her dead.

According to that, Evelyn Renard was in her own office at the very moment I had seen her leave Miriam Tromley's apartment forty blocks away!

Almost beside myself, I hung up the receiver without bidding Miss Wharton good-bye, and went straight to Evelyn Renard's house and asked for the nurse. She looked a little curious when she saw my face. I think she thought that I was Evelyn's next-of-kin in a state of distraction.

'I can't imagine what brought on Miss Renard's attack,' she said. 'She seemed to be in a sort of trance when they found her. She must have been dead set on something, for her face was fixed with the look of a man in a death grip. It was awful to see that look on her white, unconscious face. Seemed like she

must have been making some big mental drive and just dropped off after it like that!'

'They found her about half past six?' I asked.

The nurse stared as if she found my question odd. 'So I understand,' she replied, and returned to her patient. I could hear her moaning faintly—rather a dreadful sound.

It was a fact, then, that Evelyn *had* been in her own office in a fainting-fit at the very hour when I had seen her urging Miriam Tromley to take her own life!

The marriage was postponed for a time. Three days later, Evelyn came back to the office. She went about looking so white and appealing that even the publicity manager pitied her.

'Poor girl, how she feels her friend's death!' he said.

I never told what I had seen. How could I have told it in the face of the facts. With her own hand Miriam Tromley had lifted the glass of poison to her lips. Had I not seen her in the very act?

About a month afterwards Evelyn had what the doctors called a nervous breakdown—a breakdown with delusions. She told me one of them a few days before they took her to the sanatorium. We were alone in the office.

I had just said to her, 'Miss Renard, you really ought to take a rest. You are just keeping up on will-power.'

And she had answered, 'Perhaps I am. It is wonderful what one's will can do.' She bent towards me as one telling a secret. 'Did you know that you can make your will do things at a distance when you are asleep?'

'What do you mean?' I asked, controlling my impulse to draw back from her.

She leaned nearer with a look I didn't like to meet in her murky eyes. 'Why, don't you know? You can go to bed at night and set your will to do something you want to accomplish—miles away—and it will do the thing for you, just as if you were there. Sometimes you can half remember it afterwards . . . like a dream.'

I remembered that conversation afterwards . . . when old Parton died.

Evelyn did not stay long in the sanatorium. In two weeks she was back in the office completely restored.

Miriam Tromley had not been dead a month when Evelyn Renard became Evelyn Parton. Summer was approaching. Of course, she gave up her job at the office, although she playfully remarked she should always keep her eye on it—and she did.

Mr. and Mrs. Parton sailed on the newest, highest-priced steamer for Europe in June. That was the last we ever saw of old Parton. He died suddenly in an obscure town in Italy, leaving Evelyn his sole heir. She was now sole owner of the business, not to speak of all that it had made.

I feel dreadfully about old Parton's death. How can I do otherwise? If I had told what I had seen it might have saved his life.

He had walked off an upper balcony in his sleep, so they told us. . . . But who had urged him out there . . . a useless old encumbrance now that his will was made and his fortune safely within Evelyn's grasp?

I can see a dark, shadowy figure behind old Parton, softly urging him over the brink—a spirit, you might call it, a ghost that never died. 'Ghosts of the living', the Japanese call them, the soul sent out in sleep. Is not sleep Death's sister? Evelyn had concentrated upon Miriam's death, willing her to self-destruction. Sometimes it is known as astral murder.

It would appear to be the perfect crime, wouldn't it: evidence upon which no jury would convict? But Evelyn's career did not end with Miriam Tromley or even with old Parton.

It seemed for a time as if nothing could stop Evelyn. Strange that little Blanche O'Hara should have been the one.

Blanche was MacDonough's private secretary. MacDonough was our business manager and a very keen man. I am sure he never cared for Evelyn, although, of course, he was far from guessing what she really was. He was fond of Blanche, whether fond enough to marry her one couldn't tell, but at least his favour made Blanche a person of some consequence, and Eve-

lyn had always feared discovery—strange mixture that she was of iron will and cowardice.

She never dreamed that I suspected her—luckily for me—or I should have gone the way of poor Miriam and old Parton. But for some reason her apprehensions and suspicions fastened upon Blanche. Evelyn more or less took charge of the business after old Parton died. She never had an office in the building, but she would drop in on us at least once in the day—of course, at the time she thought she was least expected—and quite often, if Mr. MacDonough was out or really busy, this brought her in touch with Blanche.

I don't believe Blanche had the faintest suspicion of what Evelyn was like. She was a frank, straightforward child, with great clear rather light-blue eyes. Though light, they were very striking, because her eyelashes were long and dark like her hair. They were rather uncanny eyes, and she had a way of fixing them upon you and leaving them there. She was probably thinking of something else when she did it—most likely MacDonough—but she certainly made you feel she was reading your inmost thoughts, piercing your very soul. It would have been a hard thing to lie to Blanche. I could see that her eyes got on Evelyn's nerves. She would do anything rather than meet them.

Blanche was a good kid, clean straight through. Like the heroine in the old-fashioned melodrama, she was the sole support of a widowed mother. But she was not sentimental about it, never made capital out of it, or regretted the necessity to go without little feminine vanities because of it.

It seems that I was predestined to the role of onlooker, for I was the sole witness of that momentous last meeting between Evelyn and Blanche.

It was one of those warmish days in winter when New York offices seem unbearably hot. Evelyn had dropped in at noon when she knew MacDonough would be out. That made me curious to start with, because I knew it meant that this time, instead of avoiding, she wanted to see Blanche. MacDonough did quite a bit of business at luncheon and consequently was often absent for a long time at that hour. While he was out,

Blanche was obliged to be in. Of course, Evelyn knew that. The first thing Evelyn did when she entered was to ask to have the window wide open. It was I who had ushered her in, and I remained near the doorway, frankly watching. For some reason, Evelyn thought me of no account. She never seemed to notice my comings or goings.

Blanche went to the window and threw it all the way up. Evelyn stole up behind her like a shadow. She never seemed to walk so that we heard her, and she almost always dressed in black. Evelyn leaned against the right-hand side of the window-ledge ; Blanche was at the left.

‘What a perfectly gorgeous day !’ Blanche said, and leaned out, drawing in long breaths.

‘What a view from this window,’ Evelyn answered. ‘Why, all those buildings are on Long Island. I wonder what that tall tower is?’

She pointed to something real or imaginary so far to the north that Blanche had to lean quite far out to see it. The window-ledge was rather low and it made me nervous to see Blanche do it. I don’t know what it was that made me suddenly look from Blanche to Evelyn.

No, Evelyn had no intention of pushing her out, not with her hands. But if you could have seen her eyes ! Never, so long as I live, shall I forget them—a snake’s eyes sending out live fires of hatred—hatred and something else. . . .

I knew what it was. It was the thing that must be in a snake’s eyes when it is charming the dove to its death.

Farther and farther little Blanche leaned out ; a scream rose to my lips ; I made a dart forward ; then, sharply, Blanche drew in and turned her eyes upon Evelyn. And under her eyes Evelyn seemed to shrink and withdraw herself as if, like the demon in a fairy story she was going to vanish. But she did not vanish. She stood staring, staring at Blanche, straight into those wide, clear blue eyes.

It was the strangest thing I have ever seen. From her evil, murky eyes Evelyn was sending out something, something that was a veritable missile of death, sending it straight into

Blanche's eyes. For a moment she was able to send it as a writhing snake may spit out venom in its last hour. But the thing that she sent could not reach its victim. From that clear light its rebounded back to its source, straight into the evil soul that lay behind Evelyn's dark eyes. A boomerang!

She made a wild movement, like a creature shot. Blanche screamed. For a second a dark thing outflung against the sky . . . then silence. Twenty stories below, Evelyn Parton lay upon the sidewalk, broken beyond recognition, in the midst of the wild pause of the passers-by.

Miriam Tromley was timid and neurotic. Parton was a feeble old man. But Blanche, young, strong, clean of soul, was not vulnerable to Evelyn's evil power, which, deflected from its target, rebounded upon her who sent it, forcing her to the suicidal act she had tried to will Blanche to perform.

When MacDonough married Blanche he took offices in another building, for never afterwards could Blanche bear to go into that room. I think, little as she sensed what had happened there, she did realize that she had been very close to the great force of evil in that place.

# PASSING OF A GOD

HENRY S. WHITEHEAD

'You say that when Carswell came into your hospital over in Port au Prince his fingers looked as though they had been wound with string,' said I, encouragingly.

'It is a very ugly story, that, Canevin,' replied Dr. Pelletier, still reluctant, it appeared.

'You promised to tell me,' I threw in.

'I know it, Canevin,' admitted Doctor Pelletier, of the U.S. Navy Medical Corps, now stationed here in the Virgin Islands. 'But,' he proceeded, 'you couldn't use this story, anyhow. There are editorial *taboos*, aren't there? The thing is too—what shall I say?—too outrageous, too incredible.'

'Yes,' I admitted in turn, 'there are *taboos*, plenty of them. Still, after hearing about those fingers as though wound with string—why not give me the story, Pelletier; leave it to me whether or not I use it. It's the story I want, mostly. I'm burning up for it.'

'I suppose it's your look-out,' said my guest. 'If you find it too gruesome for you, tell me and I'll quit.'

I plucked up hope once more. I had been trying for this story after getting little scraps of it which allured and intrigued me for weeks.

'Start in,' I ventured soothingly, pushing the silver swizzle-jug after the humidor of cigarettes from which Pelletier was even now making a selection. Pelletier helped himself to the swizzle, frowningly. Evidently he was torn between the desire

to pour out the story of Arthur Carswell and some complication of feelings against doing so. I sat back in my wicker lounge-chair and waited.

Pelletier moved his large bulk about in his chair. Plainly now he was cogitating how to open the tale. He began meditatively:

'I don't know that I ever heard public discussion of the malignant bodily growths except among medical people. Science knows little about them. The fact of such diseases, though, is well known to everyone, through campaigns of prevention, the life insurance companies, appeals for funds——'

'Well, Carswell's case is primarily one of those.'

He paused, and gazed into the glowing end of his cigarette.

'Primarily?' I threw in, encouragingly.

'Yes, speaking as a surgeon; that's where this thing begins, I suppose.'

I sat still, waiting.

'Have you read Seabrook's book *The Magic Island*?' asked Pelletier suddenly.

'Yes,' I answered. 'What about it?'

'Then I suppose that from your own experience, knocking about the West Indies, and your study of it all, a good bit of that stuff of Seabrook's is familiar to you, isn't it?—the *voodoo* and the hill customs and all the rest of it, especially over in Haiti. You could check up on a writer like Seabrook, couldn't you, more or less?'

'Yes,' I said, 'practically all of that was an old story to me—a very fine piece of work, however; the thing clicks all the way through—an honest and thoroughly good piece of investigation.'

'Anything in it new to you?'

'Yes—Seabrook's statement that there was an exchange of personalities between the sacrificial goat—at the "baptism"—and the young black girl; the chapter he calls "Girl-Cry—Goat-Cry". That at least was a new one on me, I admit.'

'You will recall, if you read it carefully, that he attributed that phenomenon to his own personal "slant" on the thing. Isn't that the case?'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'I think that is the way he put it.'

"Then," resumed Doctor Pelletier, "I take it that all the material of his—I notice that there have been a lot of stories written using his terms lately—is sufficiently familiar to you so that you have some clear idea of the Haitian-African demi-gods like Ogoun Badagris, Damballa, and the others, taking up their residence for a short time in some devotee?"

"The idea is very well understood," said I. "Mr. Seabrook mentions it among a number of other local phenomena. It was an old negro who came up to him while he was eating, thrust his soiled hands into the dishes of food, surprised him considerably—then, was surrounded by worshippers who took him to the nearest *houmfort* or voodoo house, let him sit on the altar, brought him food, hung all their jewellery on him, worshipped him for the time being; then characteristically quite utterly ignored the old fellow after the part of the "possession" of the "deity" ceased and reduced him to an unimportant old pantaloons, as he was before."

"That summarizes it exactly," agreed Doctor Pelletier. "That, Canevin; that kind of thing, I mean, is the real starting-place of this dreadful matter of Arthur Carswell."

"You mean——?" I barged out at Pelletier, vastly intrigued. I had no idea that there was voodoo mixed up with the case.

"I mean that Arthur Carswell's first intimation that there was anything wrong with him was just such a "possession" as the one you have recounted."

"But—but——" I protested, "I had supposed—I had every reason to believe—that it was a surgical matter! Why, you just objected to telling about it on the ground that——"

"Precisely," said Doctor Pelletier, calmly. "It was such a surgical case, but, as I say, it *began* in much the same way as the "occupation" of that old negro's body by Ogoun Badagris, or whichever one of their devilish deities that happened to be just as you say is well known to fellows like yourself who go in for such things, and just as Seabrook recorded it."

"Well," said I, "you go ahead in your own way, Pelletier. I'll do my best to listen. Do you mind an occasional question?"

"Not in the least," said Doctor Pelletier, considerately. He

shifted himself to a still more pronouncedly recumbent position in my Chinese rattan lounge-chair, lit a fresh cigarette and proceeded:

'Carswell had worked up a considerable intimacy with the snake-worship of interior Haiti, all the sort of thing familiar to you ; the sort of thing set out probably for the first time—in English, at least—in Seabrook's book ; all the gatherings and the "baptism", and the sacrifices of the fowls and the bull and the goats ; the orgies of the worshippers, the boom and thrill of the *rata* drums—all that strange, incomprehensible, rather silly-surfaced, deadly underneath worship of "the Snake", which the Dahomeyans brought with them to old Hispaniola, now Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

'He had been there, as you may have heard, for a number of years ; went there in the first place because everybody thought he was a kind of failure at home ; made a good living, too, in a way nobody but an original minded man like him would have thought of—shot ducks on the Leogane Marshes, dried them and exported them to New York and San Francisco to the United States' two largest China-towns.

'For a "failure", too, Carswell was a particularly smart-looking chap ; smart, I mean, in the English sense of that word. He was one of those fellows who was always shaved, clean, freshly groomed, even under the rather adverse conditions of his living, there in Leogane by the salt marshes ; and of his trade, which was to kill and dry ducks. A fellow can get pretty careless and let himself go at that sort of things, away from "home"—away, too, from such niceties as there are in a place like Port au Prince.

'He looked, in fact, like a fellow just off somebody's yacht, the first time I saw him, there in the hospital in Port au Prince, and that, too, was right after a rather singular experience which would have unnerved or unsettled pretty nearly anybody.

'But not so old Carswell. No, indeed. I speak of him as "old Carswell", Canevin. That, though, is a kind of affectionate term. He was somewhere about forty-five then ; it was two years ago,

you see, and in addition to his being very spick and span—well-groomed, you know—he looked surprisingly young, somehow. One of those faces which showed experience, but along with the experience a philosophy. The lines in his face were good lines, if you get what I mean—lines of humour and courage; no dissipation, no let-down kind of lines, nothing of slackness such as you would see in the face of even a comparatively young beachcomber. No, as he strode into my office, almost jauntily, there in the hospital, there was nothing, nothing whatever, about him to suggest anything else but a prosperous fellow-American, a professional chap, for choice, who might as I say have just come from somebody's yacht.

'And yet—Good God, Canevin, the story that came out!'

Naval surgeon though he was, with service in Haiti, at sea, in Nicaragua and the China Station to his credit, Doctor Peltier rose at this point and almost agitatedly walked up and down my gallery. Then he sat down and lit a fresh cigarette.

'There is,' he said reflectively, and as though weighing his words carefully, 'there is, Canevin, amongst various others, a somewhat "wild" theory that somebody put forward several years ago about the origin of malignant tumours. It never gained very much approval in the medical profession, but it has at least the merit of originality and—it was new. Because of those facts it had a certain amount of currency, and there are those, in and out of medicine, who will believe in it. It is that there are certain *nuclei*, certain masses, so to speak, of the bodily material which have persisted—not generally, you understand, but in certain cases—among certain persons who are susceptible to this horrible disease which in the pre-natal state did not develop fully or normally—little places in the bodily structure, that is—if I make myself clear?—which remain undeveloped.

'Something, according to this hypothesis, something like a sudden jar, or a bruise, or a kick, a blow with the fist, the result of a fall, or what not, causes traumatism—physical injury, that is, you know—to one of the focus-places, and the undeveloped little mass of material *starts in to grow*, and so displaces the normal tissue which surrounds it.'

"One objection to the theory is that there are at least two varieties, well known and recognized scientifically; the carcinoma, which is itself sub-divided into two kinds, the hard and the soft carcinomas, and the sarcoma, which is a soft thing, like what is popularly understood by a "tumour". Of course, they are all "tumours", particular kinds of tumours, malignant tumours. What lends a certain credibility to the theory I have just mentioned is the malignancy, the growing element. For, whatever the underlying reason, they grow, Canevin, as is well recognized, and this explanation I have been talking about gives a reason for the growth. The "malignancy" is really that one of these things seems to have its own life. All this probably you know?"

I nodded. I did not wish to interrupt. I could see that this side-issue on to a scientific by-path must have something to do with the story of Carswell.

"Now," resumed Pelletier, "notice this fact, Canevin. Let me put it in the form of a question like this: To what kind or type of voodoo worshipper does the "possession" by one of their deities occur? From your own knowledge of such things, what would you say?"

"To the incomplete, the abnormal, to an *old man or woman*," I said, slowly reflecting. "Or—to a child, or perhaps to an idiot. Idiots, ancient crones, backward children, "town fools" and the like all over Europe are supposed to be in some mysterious way *en rapport* with deity—or with Satan! It is an established peasant belief. Even among the Mohammedans the moron or idiot is "afflicted of God". There is no other better established belief held along such lines of thought."

"Precisely!" exclaimed Pelletier, "and, Canevin, go back once more to Seabrook's incident that we spoke of. What type of person was "possessed"?"

"An old, doddering man," said I, "one well gone in his dotage, apparently."

"Right once more! Note now two things. First, I will admit to you that that theory I have just been expounding never made much of a hit with me. It might be true, but—very few first-rate

men in our profession thought much of it, and I followed that negative lead and didn't think much of it or, indeed, much about it. I put it down to the vapourings of the theorist who first thought it out and published it, and let it go at that. Now, Canevin, I am convinced *that it is true!* The second thing, then. When Carswell came into my office in the hospital over there in Port au Prince, the first thing I noticed about him—I had never seen him before, you see—was a peculiar, almost indescribable, discrepancy. It was between his general appearance of weather-worn cleanliness, general fitness, his "smart" appearance in his clothes—all that which fitted together about the clean-cut, open character of the fellow; and what I can only describe as *pursiness*. He seemed in good condition, I mean to say—and yet there was something somehow *flabby* somewhere in his make-up. I couldn't put my finger on it, but—it was there—a suggestion of something that detracted from the impression he gave as being an upstanding fellow, a good fellow to have beside you in a pinch—that kind of person.

"The second thing I noticed was—just after he had taken a chair beside my desk—his fingers and thumbs. They were swollen, looked sore, as though they had been wound with string. That was the first thing I thought of—being wound with string. He saw me looking at them, held them out to me abruptly, laid them side by side on the desk—his hands, I mean—and smiled at me.

"I see that you have noticed them, Doctor," he said, almost jovially. "That makes it a little easier for me to tell you what I'm here for. It's—well, you might put it down as a symptom."

"I looked at his fingers and thumbs—every one of them was affected in the same way—and ended up with putting a magnifying glass over them."

"They were all bruised and reddened, and here and there on several of them the skin was abrazed, broken *circularly*—it was a most curious-looking set of digits. My new patient was addressing me again.

"I'm not here to ask you riddles, Doctor," he said, gravely

this time, "but would you care to make a guess at what did that to those fingers and thumbs of mine?"

"Well," I came back at him, "without knowing what's happened, it looks as if you'd been trying to wear about a hundred rings, all at one time, and most of them didn't fit."

"Carswell nodded his head at me. "Score one for the medico," he said, and laughed. "Even numerically you're almost on the dot, sir. The precise number was one hundred and six!"

"I confess I stared at him then. But he wasn't fooling. It was a cold, sober, serious fact that he was stating; only he saw that it had a humorous side, and that intrigued him as anything humorous always did, I found out after I got to know Carswell a lot better than I did then."

"You said you wouldn't mind a few questions, Pelletier," I interjected.

"Fire away," said Pelletier. "Do you see any light, so far?"

"I was naturally figuring along with you, as you told it so far," said I. "Do I infer correctly that Carswell, having lived there for—how long?—four or five years or so—?"

"Seven, to be exact," put in Pelletier.

"—that Carswell, being pretty familiar with the native doings, had mixed into things, got the confidence of his black neighbours in and around Leogane, became somewhat "adept", had the run of the *houmforts*, so to speak—the fortune-telling at the festivals, and so forth, and—and had been "visited" by one of the black deities? That, apparently, if I'm any judge of tendencies, is what your account seems to be leading up to. Those bruised fingers—the one hundred and six rings—good heavens, man, is it really possible?"

"Carswell told me all about that end of it a little later—yes, that was precisely what happened, but—that, surprising, incredible as it seems, is only the small end of it all. You just wait—!"

"Go ahead," said I. "I am all ears, I assure you."

"Well, Carswell took his hands off the desk after I had looked at them through my magnifying glass and then waved one of them at me in a kind of deprecating gesture.

"I'll go into all that if you're interested to hear about it, Doctor," he assured me, "but that isn't what I'm here about." His face grew suddenly very grave. "Have you plenty of time?" he asked. "I don't want to let my case interfere with anything."

"Fire ahead!" says I, and he leaned forward in his chair.

"Doctor," says he, "I don't know whether or not you ever heard of me before. My name's Carswell and I live over Leogane way. I'm an American, like yourself, as you can probably see, and even after seven years of it out there, duck-hunting, mostly, with virtually no white man's doings for a very long time, I haven't 'gone native' or anything of the sort. I wouldn't want you to think I'm one of those wasters." He looked up at me hopefully for my estimate of him. He had been by himself a good deal; perhaps too much. I nodded at him. He looked me in the eye squarely and nodded back. "I guess we understand each other," he said, and then he went on.

"Seven years ago it was I came down here. I've lived over there ever since. What few people know about me regard me as a kind of failure, I dare say. But, Doctor, there was a reason for that—a pretty definite reason. I won't go into it beyond your end of it—the medical end, I mean. I came down because of this."

He stood up then and I saw what made this "discrepancy" I spoke about, that "flabbiness" which went so ill with the general cut of the man. He turned up the lower ends of his white drill jacket and put his hand a little to the left of the middle of his stomach. "Just notice this," he said, and stepped towards me.

"There, just over the left centre of that area, and extending upwards toward the spleen, on the left side, you know, there was a protuberance. Seen closely, it was apparent that here was some sort of internal growth. It was that which had made him look flabby-stomached.

"This was diagnosed for me in New York," Carswell said. "A little more than seven years ago. They told me it was inoperable then. After seven years I daresay it's worse, if anything. To put the thing in a nutshell, Doctor, I had to 'let go'

then. I got out of a promising business, broke off my engagement and came here. I won't expatiate on it all, but—it was pretty tough, Doctor, pretty tough. I've lasted all right so far. It hasn't troubled me—till just lately. That's why I drove in this afternoon to see you, to see if anything could be done."

"Has it been kicking up lately?" I asked him.

"Yes," said Carswell simply. "They said it would kill me, probably within a year or two, as it grew. It hasn't grown—much. I've lasted a little more than seven years, so far."

"Come into the operating room," I invited him. "And take your clothes off and let's get a good look at it."

"Anything you say," returned Carswell, and followed me back into the operating room then and there.

I had a good look at Carswell first, superficially. That preliminary examination revealed a growth quite typical, the self-contained, not the fibrous type, in the location I've already described, and about the size of an average man's head. It lay embedded, fairly deep. It was what we call "encapsulated". That, of course, is what had kept Carswell alive.

Then we put the X-rays on it, fore and aft, and sideways. One of those things doesn't always respond very well to skia-graphic examination, to the X-ray, that is, but this one showed clearly enough. Inside it appeared a kind of dark triangular mass, with the small end at the top. When Dr. Smithson and I had looked him over thoroughly, I asked Carswell whether or not he wanted to stay with us to come into the hospital as a patient for treatment.

"I'm quite in your hands, Doctor," he told me. "I'll stay or do whatever you want me to. But first"—and for the first time he looked a little embarrassed—"I think I'd better tell you the story that goes with my coming here. However, speaking plainly, do you think I've a chance?"

"Well," said I, "speaking plainly, yes, there is a chance—maybe a fifty-fifty chance, maybe a little less. On the one hand, this thing has been left alone for seven years since the original diagnosis. It is probably less operable than it was when you were in New York. On the other hand, we know a lot more, not

about these things, Mr. Carswell, but about surgical technique, than we did seven years ago. On the whole, I'd advise you to stay and get ready for an operation, and, say, about forty-sixty you'll go back to Leogane, or back to New York if you feel like it, several pounds lighter in weight and a new man. If it takes you on the table, well, you've had a lot more time out there gunning for ducks in Leogane than those New York fellows allowed you."

"I'm with you," said Carswell, and we assigned him a room, took his "history" and began to get him ready for his operation.

"We did the operation two days later at ten-thirty in the morning, and in the meantime Carswell told me his story about it.

"It seems that he had made quite a place for himself there in Leogane, among the negroes and the ducks. In seven years a man like Carswell, with his mental and dispositional equipment, can go quite a long way, anywhere. He had managed to make quite a good thing out of his duck-drying industry, employed five or six hands in his little factory, rebuilt rather a good house he had acquired there for a song, right after he had arrived, collected local antiques to add to the equipment he had brought along with him, made himself a real home of a peculiar bachelor kind and, above all, got in solid with all the black people all round him. Almost incidentally, I gather from him—he had no gift of narrative and I had to question him a great deal—he had got on to and in to the know in the voodoo thing. There wasn't, as far as I could gather, any aspect of it all that he hadn't been in on, except, that is, *la chèvre sans cornes*—the goat without horns, you know—the human sacrifice on great occasions. In fact, he strenuously denied that voodooists resorted to that ; said it was a *canard* against them ; that they never really did such things, never had, unless back in prehistoric times in Guinea, Africa.

"But there wasn't anything about it at all that he hadn't at his very finger-ends, and at first-hand, too. The man was a walking encyclopaedia of the native beliefs, customs and practices. He knew, too, every turn and twist of their speech. He hadn't, as he had said at first, "gone native" in the slightest degree, and

yet without lowering his White Man's dignity by a trifle, he had got it all.

"That brings us to the specific happening—"the story", which he had said went along with his reason for coming in to the hospital in Port au Prince to us.

"It appears that his sarcoma had never, practically, troubled. Beyond noting a very gradual increase in its size from year to year, he said he "wouldn't know he had one". In other words, characteristically, it never gave him any pain or direct annoyance beyond the sense of the wretched thing being there and increasing on him, and always drawing him closer to that end of life which the New York doctors had warned him about.

"Then it happened, only three days before he came to the hospital; he had gone suddenly unconscious one afternoon as he was walking down his shell path to his gateway. The last thing he remembered then was being "about four steps from the gate". When he woke up, it was dark. He was seated in a big chair on his own front gallery and the first thing he noticed was that his fingers and thumbs were sore and ached very considerably. The next thing was that there were flares burning all along the edge of the gallery and down in the front yard and along the road outside the paling fence that divided his property from the road, and in the lights of these flares there swarmed literally hundreds of negroes, gathered about him and mostly on their knees; lined along the gallery and on the grounds below it, prostrating themselves, chanting, putting earth and sand on their heads; and when he leaned back in his chair something hurt the back of his neck, and he found he was being nearly choked with the necklaces, strings of beads, gold and silver coin strings and other kinds that had been slipped over his head. His fingers and the thumbs, as well, were covered with gold and silver rings, many of them jammed on so as to stop the circulation.

"From his knowledge of their beliefs, he recognized what had happened to him. He had, he figured, probably fainted, although such a thing was not at all common with him, going down the pathway to the yard gate, and the blacks had supposed him to be "possessed", as he had several times seen black

people, children, old men and women, morons chiefly, similarly "possessed". He knew that now that he was recovered from whatever had happened to him the "worship" ought to cease, and if he simply sat quiet and took what was coming to him they would, as soon as they realized he was "himself", once more leave him alone and he would get some relief from this uncomfortable state of the surroundings, get rid of the necklaces and rings, get a little privacy.

"But—the queer part of it all was that they didn't quit. No, the mob around the house and on the gallery increased rather than diminished, and at last he was put to it from sheer discomfort—he said he came to the point where he felt he couldn't stand it for another instant—to speak up and ask the people to leave him in peace.

"They left him, he says, right off the bat, immediately, without a protesting voice, but—and here was what started him on his major puzzlement—they didn't take off the necklaces and rings. No—they left the whole set of that metallic drapery which they had hung and thrust upon him right there, and after he had been left alone, as he had requested, and had gone into his house and lifted off the necklaces and worked the rings loose, the *next* thing was that old Pa'p Josef, the local *papaloi*, together with three or four other neighbouring *papaloi*, witch-doctors from nearby villages, and followed by a very old man who was known to Carswell as the *hougan*, or the head witch-doctor of the whole countryside thereabouts, came in to him in a kind of procession and knelt down all around him on the floor of his living-room, and laid down gourds of cream and bottles of red wine, and cooked chickens, and even a big china bowl of Tannia soup—a dish he abominated, said it always tasted like soapy water to him!—and then backed out, leaving him with these comestibles.

"He said that this sort of attention persisted in his case right through the three days that he remained in his house in Leogane before he started out for the hospital, and would, apparently, be still going on if he hadn't come in to us at Port au Prince.

"But—his coming-in was not the least because of this. It had

puzzled him a great deal, for there was nothing like it in his experience, nor, so far as he could gather from their attitude, in the experience of the people about him, of the *papalois* or even of the *hougan* himself. They acted, in other words, precisely as though the "deity" supposed to have taken up his abode within him had remained there, although there seemed no precedent for such an occurrence, and so far as he knew he felt precisely just as he had felt right along—that is, full awake and certainly not in anything like an abnormal condition and very positively not in anything like a fainting fit!

"That is to say—he felt precisely the same as usual—except that he had recurrent, almost unbearable, pains in the vicinity of his lower abdominal region.

"There was nothing surprising to him in this accession of the new painfulness. He had been warned that that would be the beginning of the end. It was in the rather faint hope that something might be done that he had come in to the hospital. It speaks volumes for the man's fortitude, for his strength of character, that he came in so cheerfully; acquiesced in what we suggested to him to do; remained with us, facing those comparatively slim chances with complete cheerfulness.

"For—we did not deceive Carswell—the chances were somewhat slim. "Sixty-forty", I had said, but, as I afterwards made clear to him, the favourable chances as gleaned from the mortality tables were a good deal less than that. He went to the table in a state of mind quite unchanged from his accustomed cheerfulness. He shook hands good-bye with Dr. Smithson and me, "in case", and also with Dr. Jackson, who acted as anaesthetist.

"Carswell took an enormous amount of ether to get him off. His consciousness persisted longer perhaps than that of any surgical patient I can remember. At last, however, Dr. Jackson intimated to me that I might begin, and Dr. Smithson, standing by with the retracting forceps, I made the first incision. It was my intention, after careful study of the X-ray plates, to open it up from in front, in an up-and-down direction, establish drainage directly, and, leaving the wound in the sound tissue in front

of it open, to attempt to get it healed up after removing its contents. Such is the technique of the major portion of successful operations.

'It was a comparatively simple matter to expose the outer wall. This accomplished, and after a few words of consultation with my colleague, I very carefully opened it. We recalled that the X-ray had shown a triangular-shaped mass within. This apparent content we attributed to some obscure chemical colouration of the contents. I made my incisions with the greatest care and delicacy, of course. The critical part of the operation lay right at this point and the greatest exactitude was indicated.

'At last the outer coats of it were cut through and retracted, and with renewed caution I made the incision through the inmost wall of tissue. To my surprise, and Dr. Smithson's, the inside was comparatively dry. The gauze which the nurse attending had caused to follow the path of the knife was hardly moistened. I ran my knife down below the original scope of that last incision, then upward from the upper extremity, greatly lengthening the incision as a whole, if you follow me.

'Then, reaching my gloved hand within this long up-and-down aperture, I felt about and at once discovered that I could get my fingers in around the inner wall quite easily. I reached out and worked my fingers in farther and farther, finally getting both hands inside and at last feeling my fingers touch inside the posterior or rear wall. Rapidly now I ran the edges of my hands round inside, and quite easily lifted out the "inside". This, a mass weighing several pounds of more or less solid material, was laid aside on the small table beside the operating table and, again pausing to consult with Dr. Smithson—the operation was going, you see, a lot better than either of us had dared to anticipate—and being encouraged by him to proceed to a radical step which we had not hoped to be able to take, I began the dissection, from the surrounding normal tissue, of the now collapsed walls. This, a long, difficult and harassing job, was accomplished at the end of perhaps ten or twelve minutes of

gruelling work, and the bag-like thing, now completely severed from the tissues in which it had been so long embedded, was placed also on the side table.

'Dr. Jackson reporting favourably on my patient's condition under the anaesthetic, I now proceeded to dress the large aperture and to close the body wound. This was accomplished in a routine manner, and then together we bandaged Carswell and he was taken back to his room to await awakening from the ether.

'Carswell disposed of, Dr. Jackson and Dr. Smithson left the operating room and the nurse started to clean up after the operation, dropping the instruments into the boiler, and so on—a routine set of duties. As for me, I picked up the shell in a forceps, turned it about under the strong electric operating light and laid it down again. It presented nothing of interest for a possible laboratory examination.

'Then I picked up the more or less solid contents which I had laid, very hastily and without looking at it—you see, my actual removal of it had been done inside, in the dark, for the most part, and by the sense of feeling in my hands, if you remember—on the table; I still had my operating gloves on to prevent infection when looking over these specimens, and, still not looking at it particularly, I carried it out into the laboratory.

'Canevin'—Doctor Pelletier looked at me sombrely through the very gradually fading light of late afternoon, the period just before the abrupt falling of our tropic dusk. 'Canevin,' he repeated, 'honestly, I don't know how to tell you! Listen, now, old man, do something for me, will you?'

'Why, yes—of course,' I said, considerably mystified. 'What is it, Pelletier?'

'My car is out in front of the house. Come on home with me, up to my house, will you? Let's say I want to give you a cocktail! Anyhow, maybe you'll understand better when you are there. *I want to tell you the rest up at my house, not here.* Will you please come, Canevin?'

I looked at him closely. This seemed to me a very strange, abrupt request. Still there was nothing whatever unreasonable about such a whim on Pelletier's part.

'Why, yes, certainly I'll go with you, Pelletier, if you want me to.'

'Come on, then,' said Pelletier, and we started for the car.

The doctor drove himself, and after we had taken the first turn in the rather complicated route from my house to his, on the extreme top of Denmark Hill, he said in a quiet voice, 'Put together now, Canevin, certain points, if you please, in this story. Note, kindly, how the black people in Leogane acted, according to Carswell's story. Note, too, that theory I was telling you about. Do you recollect it clearly?'

'Yes . . .' I said, more mystified.

'Just keep those two points in mind, then,' added Doctor Pelletier, and devoted himself to navigating sharp turns and plodding up two steep roadways for the rest of the drive to his house.

We went in and found his houseboy laying the table for his dinner. Doctor Pelletier is unmarried and keeps a hospitable bachelor establishment. He ordered cocktails and the houseboy departed on that errand. Then he led me into a kind of office littered with medical and surgical paraphernalia. He lifted some papers off a chair, motioned me into it and took another nearby. 'Listen, now!' he said, and held up a finger at me.

'I took that thing, as I mentioned, into the laboratory,' said he. 'I carried it in my hand with my gloves still on. I laid it down on a table and turned on a powerful light over it. It was only then that I took a good look at it. It weighed several pounds, at least, was about the bulk and heft of a full-grown coconut and about the same colour as a hulled coconut—that is, a kind of medium brown. As I looked at it I saw that it was, as the X-ray had indicated, vaguely triangular in shape. It lay over on one of its sides under that powerful light, and—Canevin—so help me God!—Doctor Pelletier leaned towards me, his face working, a great seriousness in his eyes—'it moved, Cane-

vin!' he murmured ; 'and, as I looked, the thing breathed! I was just plain dumbfounded. A biological specimen like that—does not move! I shook all over, suddenly. I felt my hair prickle on the roots of my scalp. I felt chills go down my spine. Then I remembered that here I was, after an operation, in my own biological laboratory. I came close to the thing and propped it up on what might be called its logical base, if you see what I mean, so that it stood as nearly upright as its triangular formation permitted.

'And then I saw that it had faint yellowish markings over the brown, and that what you might call its skin was moving, and—as I stared at the thing—two things like little arms began to move and the top of it gave a kind of convulsive shiver and it opened straight at me, Canevin, a pair of eyes and looked me in the face.

'Those eyes—my God, Canevin, those eyes! They were eyes of something more than human, something incredibly evil, something vastly odd, sophisticated, cold, immune from anything except pure evil, the eyes of something that had been worshipped from ages and ages out of a past that went back before all known human calculations, eyes that showed all the deliberate, lurking wickedness that has ever been in the world. The eyes closed, and the thing sank over on to its side and heaved and shuddered convulsively.

'It was sick, Canevin ; and now, emboldened, holding myself together, repeating over and over again to myself that I had a case of the quavers, of post-operative "nerves", I forced myself to look closer, and as I did so I got from it a faint whiff of ether. Twin tiny, ape-like nostrils, over a clamped-shut slit of a mouth, were exhaling and inhaling : drawing in the good pure air, exhaling ether fumes. It popped into my head that Carswell had consumed a terrific amount of ether before he went under ; we had commented on that, Dr. Jackson particularly. I put two and two together, remembered we were in Haiti where things are not like New York, Boston or Baltimore. Those negroes had believed that the "deity" had not come out of Carswell,

do you see? *That* was the thing that held the edge of my mind. The thing stirred uneasily, put out one of its "arms", groped about, stiffened.

"I reached for a nearby specimen jar, reasoning almost blindly that, if this thing were susceptible to ether, it would be susceptible to—well, my gloves were still on my hands, and—now shuddering so that I could hardly move at all, I had to force every motion—I reached out and took hold of the thing—it felt like moist leather—and dropped it into the jar. Then I carried the carboy of preserving alcohol over to the table and poured it in till the ghastly thing was entirely covered, the alcohol near the top of the jar. It writhed once, then rolled over and lay still on its "back", the mouth now open. Do you believe me, Canevin?"

"I have always said that I would believe anything on proper evidence," said I, slowly, "and I would be the last to question a statement of yours, Pelletier. However, although I have, as you say, looked into some of these things more than most, it seems, well—"

Doctor Pelletier said nothing. Then he slowly got up out of his chair. He stepped over to a wall-cupboard and returned, a wide-mouth specimen jar in his hand. He laid the jar down before me in silence.

I looked into it, through the slightly discoloured alcohol with which the jar—tightly sealed with rubber tape and sealing wax—was nearly filled to the brim. There, on the jar's bottom, lay such a thing as Pelletier had described (a 'thing' which, if it had been sealed upright, would have somewhat resembled that representation of the happy little godling 'Billiken', which was popular twenty years ago as a desk ornament), a thing suggesting the sinister, the unearthly, even in this desiccated form. I looked long at the thing.

"Excuse me for even seeming to hesitate," I said, reflectively.

"I can't say that I blame you. It is, by the way, the first and only time I had ever tried to tell the story to somebody."

"And Carswell?" I asked. "I've been intrigued with that good fellow and his difficulties. How did he come out of it all?"

'He made a magnificent recovery from the operation,' said Pelletier, 'and afterwards, when he went back to Leogane, he told me that the negroes, while glad to see him quite as usually, had quite lost interest in him as the throne of a "divinity".'

'H'm,' I remarked. 'It would seem, that, to bear out—'

'Yes,' said Pelletier. 'I have always regarded that fact as absolutely conclusive. Indeed, how otherwise could one possibly account for—*this*?' He indicated the contents of the laboratory jar.

I nodded my head in agreement. 'I can only say that—if you won't feel insulted, Pelletier—you are singularly open-minded for a man of science. What, by the way, became of Carswell?'

The houseboy came in with a tray and Pelletier and I drank to each other's good health.

'He came in to Port au Prince,' replied Pelletier, after he had done the honours. 'He did not want to go back to the States, he said. The lady to whom he had been engaged had died a couple of years before; he felt that he would be out of touch with American business. The fact is—he had stayed on here too long—too continuously. But he remains an authority on Haitian native affairs, and is consulted by the High Commissioner. He knows literally more about Haiti than the Haitians themselves. I wish you might meet him; you'd have a lot in common.'

'I'll hope to do that,' I said, and rose to leave. The houseboy appeared at the door, smiling in my direction.

'The table is set for two, sar,' he said.

Dr. Pelletier led the way into the dining-room, taking it for granted that I would remain and dine with him. We are informal in St. Thomas about such matters. I telephoned home and sat down.

Pelletier suddenly laughed—he was halfway through his soup at the moment. I looked up inquiringly. He put down his soup spoon and looked across the table at me.

'It seems a bit odd,' he remarked, 'when you stop to think of it! There's one thing Carswell doesn't know about Haiti and what happens there.'

'What's that?' I inquired.

'That—thing—in there,' said Pelletier, indicating the office with his thumb in the way artists and surgeons do. 'I thought he'd had troubles enough without *that* on his mind, too.'

I nodded in agreement and resumed my soup. Pelletier has a cook in a thousand. . . .

# THE WONDERFUL TUNE

J. D. KERRUISH

IT SEEMED such an innocent little thing when Larssen rehearsed the details. Besides, it was magic, *ergo* bosh.

'What is the Huldra King's tune?' asked Iris.

'It is the crowning piece of Huldra music; and there is a spell attached to it,' said Larssen.

'As long as it is played, all present must dance to it,' he further informed her. 'Also, the player cannot stop playing it—however he wishes to. . . .'

Heaven knows, he himself wished to stop playing it that night! I'd like to forget it myself—get that tune out of my head, and the sound of its beastly thuds, the disgusting pad, padding! If I set it out in words, perhaps they may not come into my reluctant memory so often.

• • • • •

This happened a good while ago, when it meant rough travelling if you wanted to get from Davos to Italy in the winter. But I can only tell the tale now by arrangement with Einar Larssen, because years have steeled Madame Larssen's nerves and it will not upset her for life if she comes across this account and recognizes, behind the substitute names, what she missed in the Fasplana Inn.

A telegram summoned Mrs. Walsh and Iris to the bedside of a relative who was in extremis, for the tenth time in three years, in a North Italian health resort. Iris and I had only been engaged

a week, so even strong-minded Mrs. Walsh had to stretch a point and let me accompany them. We set off from Davos comfortably enough, and it was a matter of carriages until late afternoon.

Twilight shut down on us negotiating an uncommonly trying pass of the Rhaetic Alps. Snowflakes as big as one's joined thumbs coming down thick, the landscape blotted into unstarred greyness, only the ashy reflection of the nearer snow showing that we were on earth and not jolting over derelict worlds in an infinitude of blank space. At the Hospiz at the top of the pass we changed to a sledge and the driver removed all the horse bells before starting. The chime of them might start off some delicately poised mass of snow from the heights on top of us.

So, hushedly, we drove over a snow floor, coming at times on the top of a telegraph pole just over the surface, the wires making a slow Aeolian harping level with our feet. The snow was falling its thickest when the accident occurred.

A bad spill over a buried obstruction. The women fell into the snow, I landed against a telegraph post and sustained all the injuries—a wrist that began to swell and pain abominably, and a left shoulder that appeared to be shrivelling and losing all feeling. The rest of the drive was nightmare, the wires playing the deuce's own melody and myself almost light-headed before the flicker of lanterns came suddenly into view.

When my senses were really at my beck and call again we were in a big, timber-built hall, a fire crackling in the chimney and an enormous number of Swiss of all ages and sizes acting sympathetic chorus while Iris and her mother attended to my injuries, aided by a slim young man with a mop of tow-coloured hair.

'Allow me to introduce myself, monsieur, and then you will perhaps fulfil the formality so beloved in your country by introducing me to the ladies with whom I have had the pleasure of working for some time.' Thus said the yellow-haired man when I was propped in a chair. His French was good, but not of France. 'I am your fellow-guest, forced to stay for the night

through the blocking of the farther road. My wife is here also, but at present she is resting in her own apartment. And my name—I have no card on my person—is Einar Larssen.'

We three started in unison—'The violinist?' exclaimed Iris, and he bowed and pushed back a straggling lock self-consciously.

I made the necessary introductions. The landlord interposed nervously: 'It is perhaps advisable to inform the ladies——' he began. Larssen interrupted. I distinctly saw him bestow a warning frown on the man, and the Swiss's face expressed the comprehension of one who receives secret orders. 'Our host would impress on you that the "Four Chamois" has but little accommodation to offer at the best of time, Madame Walsh,' the violinist said smoothly. 'I hear Madame coming; she will arrange with you a fair division.'

Madame Larssen appeared now, a frail, pretty little woman in the early twenties, and hustled Mrs. Walsh and Iris off. I saw all the Swiss, the landlord and his wife, the several servants, and our driver, exchange looks as the trio departed.

'It is most awkward, Monsieur Lambton,' said Larssen, suddenly become businesslike. 'Madame Larssen is of a nervous temperament and for her sake we have been forced to a certain concealment, and we might as well extend the concealment to Madame Walsh and Mademoiselle; they will rest the easier for not knowing about it.'

I could not imagine what the fellow was driving at. Infectious disease? Robbers? 'It is behind that door they rest, monsieur,' the landlord volunteered, indicating one at the side of the hall. 'Three corpses.'

'Most ladies are averse to such housefellows,' Larssen proceeded gently. 'We will all be on our way in the morning; there is no need for them to know, eh?'

I agreed. 'They will rest the easier for knowing nothing. Three corpses? Three at once?'

The landlord waxed voluble. They were the aftermath of an avalanche. There are several kinds of avalanche, and the nastiest is the dirt avalanche. It's like the tipping-out of a titanic dust-

cart ; a filthy tide of mud and shingle, slabbed together with half-melted snow, packed with the trees, turves, rubbish heaps and corpses it has gathered in its course. The snow avalanche enfolds you dead in its chaste whiteness ; the dirt variety pinches, chokes and suffocates you slowly, then acts threshing-machine and steam-roller combined to the mortal part of you, until its force is spent and it settles with you interred somewhere in it.

Such an abomination had trickled its way down the valley hard by the inn of the 'Four Chamois' early that winter ; three men were lost in it, and that day diggers had found their remains. 'Caspar Ragotli is entire,' said mine host, with a nod at the door ; 'Melchior Fischer'—he told us detailedly how this Melchior was in pieces, most of them there, while of the third, Hans Buol, only one hand had been discovered. 'But we know it for Buol's by the open knife grasped in it,' our entertainer proceeded gloatingly. 'A fine new knife from Sheffield, Monsieur Lambton, and the hand being the right it sufficed for the whole, as the gentlemen will know. . . .'

I felt thankful for Larssen's concealment when the ladies reappeared, prepared to make the best of things. We were merry enough over our mishap now that food, fire and four walls were our portion, with sounds of storm brushing up louder and louder without to add zest to our enjoyment. The most awkward thing about it was that with my injuries I was limited to the stiff use of one hand alone and could scarcely lift that. I would stay up, if only to convince Iris there was nothing much the matter. If it had not been for my croaking, I knew she would have been enjoying everything in this small adventure enormously, from the unexpected company to the robustious dog and severe cat who slipped in when a servant was sent to bring wood from the outhouse, where they had been banished.

'But what makes them fidget round that door?' she asked innocently.

Larssen was behind her. Under fear of his eye, the landlord answered composedly, 'There is in that room a—a stock of meat, Madame.'

Now came the son of the house with the bag of an afternoon's hunt—a pair of marmots to be stuffed against the next tourist season. He placed them on a chest by the lethal door while his father took him aside for a word of caution. We made the three—host, hostess and son—sup with us, and all was so comfortable that I forgot the other guests until Larssen whispered, apologetically, 'It is not really disrespectful, Monsieur Lambton.'

We kept shocking hours for a Swiss inn, the eight of us, after the tired servants had been packed off to their quarters.

'This is like home,' said Larssen dreamily, when we were all basking round the fire. 'I come from a farm—up in the wilds beyond Romsdal—and it was even so in the old hall. The big fire in the big fireplace—the cats and dogs going crackle, crackle over the supper bones—the wind whistling—the chatter of voices. . . .'

'The one thing missing is the scraping of thy violin, my Einar,' his wife put in. 'Come, thy fingers twitch; I know it, and our friends here would not, perhaps, object—eh?'

'A recital by Herr Larssen, free and without the trouble of sitting stiff in a stuffy concert hall!' said Mrs. Walsh, and the ensuing chorus of rapturous assent sent Madame Larssen running off for her lord's instrument.

'You have heard of my Da Salo?' Larssen inquired, as he lifted the violin from its travelling case. 'My *Cavalcanti* Da Salo? It is said Cavalcanti sold his eternal welfare for the power to make a certain number of instruments that should approach as near the God-given perfection of Stradivarius' work as devilry could accomplish.'

He tilted the violin to show the play of light sinking in the amber lustre of it. 'We will have no set pieces,' he added, 'but such old tunes as I played in our farm kitchen so far away and so long ago.'

Tucking it under his chin, he swept us with the first notes right into the faery realm of sound. A realm of tingling frost that whipped the blood along the veins racingly, of icy wind

that sang of the Elder Ice at the Back of Beyond ; a very vocalisation of the eternally young, eternally pure spirit of the Northland.

Ending with a queer suggestion of a lit farmhouse at night, the loneliness of stars and ice and snow crowding to it outside, and inside fire and company and the family spirit concentrating round the holy hearth and stretching out invisible strands of love to absent ones far out in the frozen whaling fields, or at mean work in foreign cities, or dead and cherished in the other world memory of home.

Then he plunged into another tune, and another ; snatches—all snatches—all singing of the North, and the Northern chaste-ness that is fierce and passionate as the foulest vice in all other quarters of earth.

'You will not hear these at a paid-for concert—God forbid !' he observed, his dreamy voice filling a pause between two melodies. 'You are hearing, my friends, what few but children of Norway ever hear, scraps of the Huldrasleet. The melodies of the Elfkind—the Huldra Folk, we name them—no less. Snatches that bygone musicians overheard on chancy nights out in the loneliness of fjords and fells, and passed on down the ages. The Huldra Folk are the musicians of all time.'

'You would like to hear them ?' asked Mrs. Walsh, quizzically.

'I have heard them, dear Madame. Five times have I heard the Elfkind, invisible but audible, holding revels out in the empty winter nights and summer early mornings on the heights of the Dovrefeld—I, Einar Larssen.'

Mrs. Walsh started a little ; but the rest of us were not much surprised, if I can speak from analysis of my own feelings and a glance at the eyes of the others.

'There was one tune,' Larssen went on meditatively. 'It was a dark and windy night—like this one. I was searching for a strayed sheep. I found it in a field. Then, over a hedge, the melody began to flow. It was a tune ! It got into my fingers and toes ; I began to dance to it. There in the snow I danced, and my senses flowed out of my body in sheer ecstasy while my emptied heart and head were filled with the tune.'

His face queerly lit by firelight, his yellow mane tossing as he gesticulated illustratively, he carried us all on by the conviction of his voice over the monstrosity of his relation.

'Then the stark pines on the slope beyond the hedge bent and waved their branches—in time to the tune. The snow was swished about in powder, as the frozen grassblades beneath waked and waved—to the tune. The stars began to glide about in the sky, and to bow themselves to and from the earth, growing bigger as they approached it and shrinking as they swirled back in the mazes of the dance—to the tune. Then, if you please, I woke. Woke, with the moon much further across the heavens than she had been when the first note of the tune came to me, and the sheep I had come to find lying exhausted in a patch trampled flat and muddy by its hooves. And I, also, lay in the middle of a bare, trampled patch in surrounding snow. That is the truth.'

He drew breath and proceeded.

'I did not remember the tune entirely, though I had heard it repeated many times. A short tune; very short. When the Huldra fiddler reached its end he began again, round and round in a circle of music. The middle part I remember, but of the end and the beginning only certain detached notes. I tried often, by playing what I recollect, to make the forgotten parts slip into their places, but unavailingly——'

He went to the main door and opened it. The wind swept in steadily, but the snowfall had stopped and a big moon looked down on piled white mountains and glaring snowfields.

'It was so—clear, windy and white—when I heard the tune,' he said thoughtfully.

'Similarity of outward circumstances will revive a train of emotion or thought experienced long ago,' Mrs. Walsh nodded.

He closed the door and came back to the fire. Then his eyes lit and he drew the bow across the strings with a large gesture. Followed a few bars of melody. 'The middle part,' he explained.

Madame Larsen gave an abrupt little cry. 'Einar, can it be you heard the Huldra King's tune? Then thank heaven you cannot play it!'

'Why, my beloved?' He lifted his eyebrows gently.  
'In my district there was a tradition that one man once played it through and something happened.'

'What happened?'

'Nobody quite remembered. But it was dreadful.'

'What is the Huldra King's tune?' asked Iris.

'It is the crowning piece of Huldra music, and there is a spell attached to it. An enchantment, mademoiselle,' Larssen elucidated.

'... As long as it is played in its entirety, all who are present must dance to it,' he further informed her, after reflection.

'That does not sound very dreadful,' she laughed.

'There's something further.' He became thoughtful. 'Ah, it is that the player cannot stop playing whether he would or not. He can only stop if—let me consider—yes, if he plays it backwards or, failing that, if the strings of his violin are cut for him.'

'You could safely play it now, monsieur,' said the landlord. 'So far as I am concerned, my rheumatics would stop my dancing, however magically you played.'

'And we'—Mrs. Walsh's gesture indicated the other ladies—'are resting to summon energy enough to crawl to bed. So, Herr Larssen, we are a safe audience if you can remember your wonderful tune.'

'There was one more detail,' he went on. 'Ah, it is that if the tune were played often enough, inanimate things must dance, too.'

'That's danger for us, as we are all nearly inanimate!' Mrs. Walsh yawned frankly now.

He leant against the carved mantel and for a little while he played absently, his subconscious mind busy with reconstruction, fumbling amid its orderly lumber, connecting, parting, arranging. Then he straightened himself and swept the bow purposefully across the strings.

Slowly at first, then with added lilt and swing, there rippled forth the complete horrible tune.

I knew it, for between a chiming start and a clattering last

bar the broken chords he had first remembered fitted in followingly. It was not very long, that tune ; he reached the end, leapt, as it were, to the beginning, played it through again, and so to a third repetition.

Then the wonder began. During the second repetition a movement like the passing of a breeze had run round our little assembly. Sleepy eyes opened, heels beat time, figures stiffened. At the third we were on our feet.

It seemed perfectly natural. Though I was almost too tired and shaken to stand, the tune ran into my feet ; I made a step towards Iris and almost fell, fetched up against the wall and so fell to dancing. Dancing calmly and solemnly all by myself.

Iris made a step towards me, too, paused and shook her head. 'Poor boy, you must sit and rest,' she murmured, and paired off with the Swiss lad.

Somehow one knew the steps on first hearing the music. It was, perhaps, the Dance Primitive, holding in itself the potentialities of all saltatory art. Mainly it consisted of a mazy circling with a little crossing and up-and-down work, going on, over and over ; monotonous yet tirelessly fascinating, like some Eastern magic.

I repeat, it seemed perfectly natural. The landlord led off with his wife ; they danced with decorous determination. Mrs. Walsh and Madame Larssen were footing it with all the abandon two women paired together could be expected to indulge in. Larssen himself had begun to dance, playing conscientiously the while. I circled about, a little uncertain on my feet, my clinging arm for partner, and Iris and the lad sailed among us, light as thistledown.

Those clumsy-looking Swiss boys are among the best dancers in this world. Whenever she passed me, Iris smiled, her eyes full of far-away ecstasy.

The music quickened and took a richer tone ; it rang back from the walls, it melted and echoed in the timber ceiling ; the floorboards hummed with it ; every nerve in us was tingling.

laughing, almost crying with too much rapture of sound and motion.

Time, weariness, place, all were not. The dead beyond the door were forgotten; there was no Earth, no more Time, nothing but a ringing emptiness of melody, a singing storm of tunefulness on which one could lean and be carried like an eagle down the wind.

Yet, through all the intoxication of it, I was dimly aware that we were in a homely Swiss inn parlour; at the time that we were in the fourth dimension of music. I was rapt out of my shaken body, yet saw my surroundings clearly; saw, presently, the cat and dog rise and, on their hind legs, join in, keeping time and threading the maze unerringly.

They appeared neither wonderful nor laughable, only natural; but my dazed senses, half awoke when the two dead marmots slithered off the chest, rose on their hind feet and, with puffed-out tails swaying in time to the tune, and a queer little pit a-pat of tiny feet, that I seemed to hear through the other noises, set to one another and circled with the best of us. They swung past me, their heads level with my knees, and vanished among the other dancers. I noted their furry little faces, dropped jaws, frothy teeth and glazed eyes. Dead, most undoubtedly dead, and dancing!

The cat and dog passed me again, and the marmots chanced to be near at the same time. The dog wrinkled his upper lip disgusted at the deadness of them, the cat snapped at them in passing. The queerest thing was, the others, with one exception, did not seem to notice the four small additions to the company. Only Larssen, figuring solemnly with his fiddle for company, saw. His eyes protruded as they squinted along the Da Salo at the quartet.

'Dead!' he gasped.

'Stop now, man!' I called. 'This fooling——'

'I cannot,' he cried back hoarsely, and began the melody over again for the fifteenth time at least. 'The tradition is true——'

Then, as the opening movement rippled forth again, in the inner room three crashes sounded.

Two almost simultaneously, yet singularly distinct from one another, the third a few seconds later. Loud, resonant, wooden crashes. Then silence in that room, and in ours the swell and swing of the infernal melody and the pat of dancing feet.

The sound had been too pronounced for even enthralled senses to disregard. All looked at the door for a moment. The others forgot the interruption at once and danced on, eyes blank with ecstasy ; only Larssen's face went white and the landlord's mottled grey. 'Stop, monsieur !' the landlord cried.

'I cannot !' wailed Larssen, his voice shrill with horror. 'I cannot ! For heaven's sake, Monsieur Lambton, come and cut the strings !'

'My hands are useless——' I began, and stopped at a new sound.

You must understand that I had danced nearer to the door by this time. The new sound behind it was one of scuffling and scrambling, half a dozen sounds merged in one—then—pat, pat, patter, patter, pat—was a noise of steps keeping time to the tune.

Soft steps, you'll understand, not the click of shod feet, like ours. I went round, came in range again, and listened.

A fairly heavy thumping—like a man on stockinginged feet—was approaching the door. 'What's the matter, Cyril?' asked Iris, swaying by, still rapt, as the boy and the three other women were. She did not wait for an answer. The latch of the door rattled. The latch inside the other room, you understand.

'I'll play it backwards when I can !' gasped Larssen, as we crossed each other's track. The noises in the fatal room circled away from the door, then approached and the latch was unhasped this time before the horrible, soft-falling thumps retreated. You see how it was: as we were compelled to circle round our room, so whatever it was in the other room had to circle likewise, making an attempt, whenever the door was in reach, to open it and join us and the tune.

Larssen was fiddling desperately. 'Backwards, now!' I implored.

'I cannot yet. But if I repeat it a few times more I shall be able to reverse it,' he called back.

A few more rounds would be too late. The inner room noises reached the door and it opened a crack. If what was striving to come joined us, would even ecstasy blind the women? And when the waking came—— I flung myself against the door in passing ; it snapped to again.

'A few more repetitions,' panted Larssen.

Inspiration came to me. The others, dancing in a hypnotized state, circled widely, but I could do the steps within a small compass ; in front of the door.

I could do it. I did it. Larssen made an attempt to reverse the melody. He failed.

Two more repetitions. Iris and her partner, passing me, smiled at the quaint figure I must have cut, dancing by myself in narrow circles before the door. Larssen's ashen face was running with sweat that dripped from his chin and trickled like the slack of a tide over the amber glory of the Da Salo. The padding steps approached the door ; it was jerked a little ajar. I drove it back with my sound shoulder, but a new danger arose. They—the dancers within—were imitating my tactics. They danced in a circumscribed space that grew smaller as the minutes passed.

If only we could have got the women out of the way! I gyrated, as well as I could, before the door, all the time, driving it back with my shoulder as it was thrust ajar, again and again.

Picture it. See me, one arm in a sling and the other nearly powerless, prancing and twirling before the door, trying the while to keep a temperate expression on my sweat-drenched features for the benefit of the women. The landlord only kept from dropping with fear by the magic of the tune. Larssen stepping it absurdly, trickling features set like a Greek tragic mask, his long yellow tresses bobbing about, matting into rats' tails, his eyes glaring down at the flooded, humming Da Salo. The

women and the lad, unconscious of everything save the melody, dancing with the introspective gaze of the drugged.

The door was thrust ajar once more. I dashed it back, but not before a soft padding had pattered from the bottom of the opened crack into our room.

I almost collapsed. Cat and dog and dead marmots—oh, they were respectable beside the latest addition to our company.

The people circled on; the dog, the cat, the dead marmots, they all circled; and circling with them—but keeping ever a course that drew it nearer and nearer to Larssen all the while—was a little dark shadow with a long, thin, tarnished white gleam sticking from it. I beat back the door and what more was pressing against it, and fought with nausea.

Round and round Larssen's feet, nearer and nearer, the little shadow hopped, leapt and pattered. Leaping and springing. It jumped higher and higher, always in time to the music—higher and higher—to Larssen's elbow. In another minute I knew even the enraptured dancers could not fail to see it. The door was now beaten on, with soft-falling, fierce thuds. I could not keep it shut much longer—

Up sprang the little shadow and the tarnished gleam, clear over Larssen's shoulder. A series of twanging discordant snaps that seemed to prick one's brain physically, and the tune stopped dead.

Thud! It sounded behind the door—very heavy. Then a succession of smaller thuds. I leant against the wall, panting. The dancers stopped, every face dazed and stupefied, and in an automatic way each dropped into the nearest seat.

Larssen dashed his handkerchief over his face. I contrived to throw my own on the floor behind him before he staggered to the fireplace. With my most usable hand I also managed to pick up my property again and place it on the seat behind me as I sat down on the chest by the door. The marmots were on the floor near my feet; I was enabled to hide my face for a few seconds and to compose it as I picked them up.

The eyes of the others cleared and became intelligent. 'I really think I've been asleep,' said Mrs. Walsh.

'I believe I have'—Iris rubbed her eyes.

'I think I have, too,' laughed Madame Larssen.

The landlord had made himself scarce at once, probably doubting his histrionic powers at such short notice. His wife followed him. The boy sat dazed.

'I had a dream, a ridiculous dream, too ridiculous to repeat.' Mrs. Walsh proceeded.

'I had a dream, likewise too absurd to relate,' said Madame Larssen.

'I had——' Iris checked herself and looked sudden apology at Larssen, who had arranged himself with the light at his back.

'Do not fear to hurt my feelings,' he said blandly, his voice still a little unnatural. 'You were all tired before I began. In brief, mademoiselle, I am not broken at the heart because my music had a soporific effect on you all.'

'It wasn't as if you had been playing one of your own compositions,' she apologized. 'I am sleepy, Mother; I vote we make a move.'

'Yes, we will tuck up our drowsiness in bed before it has a chance to insult anyone further,' Madame Larssen chimed in gaily.

They trooped off; Larssen kept his face in shadow, I stood carefully before the chest while bidding them good-night. When they had gone, the landlord came back. For a little while we four men stared at one another.

'Surely I have had a dream, gentlemen?' said the landlord, imploringly.

We said nothing. He hesitated, then with the haste of dislike, snatched a candle and flung open the inner door.

'Oh, Holy Virgin!' he cried.

Three coffins lay as they had tumbled from their trestles. About the room was split and tangled the coarse linen that charity had contributed.

The landlord reeled against one doorpost. Larssen clung, limp, to the other. 'I'll burn the Da Salo before I'll play that tune again!' he whispered hoarsely.

I stepped back into the large room, brought my handker-

chief and from its folds replaced in one of the coffins a shrivelled hand grasping the tarnished knife that had cut the violin strings. The boy, most composed of us all, said stolidly:

'Ah, messieurs, it appears that the dead do not enjoy being disturbed!'

# FOUR DOOMED MEN

GEOFFREY VACE

A SCREAM rending the stillness of an Indian night is not unusual. The scream which stopped Chowkander King on that mysterious by-street of Delhi where a man is wise to move on and mind his own business, that turned his face towards a forbidding-looking doorway, and sent his feet a second later flying up a narrow winding staircase more forbidding than the doorway—that scream pulsed with mortal pain and terror.

At the top of the staircase, King stopped. The scream had passed. He waited an instant for it to be repeated, but there was no sound. Only an oppressive feeling that he was being watched; that, foolishly, he was walking into a net.

He turned to the door—and stopped. It was not the door at all. It did not move under his hand. The knob was fast; it was not made to turn. With a swift intake of breath, King turned completely around and faced the door again. He was doubly sure now that he was being peered at through some hidden opening. He laughed suddenly, deep in himself. Of course!—he had tried the wrong panel in the square hall. He looked about again. Cunningly placed mirrors reflected each other, making it at first glance impossible to tell which were real and which were not.

King waited, his eyes becoming more accustomed to the half-light. After a moment of careful thought he stepped forward and seized the handle of the right door. It yielded under his touch and swung inward. A light curtain, swaying slowly under

a faint breeze, brushed into his face. Without stopping, he pushed it aside and took five steps into a pitch-black room.

At the fifth step, King halted. He seemed to sense other beings in the room, whether behind him or before him he had no means of telling. His finger sought the butt of his Service revolver and clutched it warmly. From far away came the sound of a door closing softly. A soft green light suddenly broke the gloom. With the light came the unmistakable odour of musk.

King felt a slight movement at his side and turned his head. A door had appeared in the wall. A tall figure in the native dress of a Sikh leaned gracefully in the opening. His body was completely enveloped in a long silken robe which swept the floor and revealed only a pair of turned-up pointed shoes. His head was swathed in a great turban, at the side of which flashed the jewelled hilt of a small dagger.

"The *sahib* is perhaps in the wrong house?" he suggested meditatively. His eyes glowed, his face was soft. He strode into the room with a dignity and grace that perhaps some day the West will master.

Chowkander King watched him closely. He was beginning to feel that perhaps he had been too hasty. Perhaps it would be wise to pretend that he *had* got the wrong house and make a safe getaway. But something caused him to change his mind.

"I heard a scream," he said, watching the Sikh carefully, yet not appearing to. The robed figure raised a deprecating hand and a shoulder.

"*Sahib*—this is India. This is Delhi. Screams are not uncommon."

"This scream was most uncommon. It was the cry of a man who is being murdered and knows it, yet cannot prevent it. I believe it was the cry of that man who lies behind that curtain!"

"*Sahib*!" The Sikh was startled out of his calm. He stepped quickly to King's side. The faint smile of condescension had left his face. His eyes burned.

"*Sahib*, no man lies behind that curtain. You have made a mistake. The door is immediately behind you!"

King could still have withdrawn—but King seldom withdrew.

'No mistake has been made,' he replied, not taking his eyes from the Sikh for an instant now. 'Unless you have made it. I rather think you have. You neglected to make sure that the man's feet were as carefully concealed as his dead body!'

The Sikh moved quickly—but Chowkander King was quicker. His revolver came level with the man's eyes.

'Too late now, my friend. You can see the tell-tale foot from here. Walk slowly and pull back that curtain. Then stand behind the body. And, remember, I could shoot you with ease, and I should not hesitate for one moment to do so.'

The Sikh bowed low, folding his arms across his chest.

'The *sahib* errs,' he said with dignity. 'But, having no choice, I shall do as the *sahib* says.'

He turned his back on King's levelled weapon and strode slowly towards the portiere. With a swish of his arm he threw it back and stood behind it.

'Who is that man?' asked King sharply. The figure lay half on its side, half on its back. Its long arms were flung wide, its slant eyes closed. The silk robe, three-coloured, which covered it, could belong only to an Oriental of high caste.

The Sikh raised his head a trifle, sending scintillating lights from the jewels of his dagger.

'I could tell the *sahib* who the Chinaman is; yet once again I make the suggestion that the *sahib* leave; that he is in the wrong house. Perhaps it was the house next door that the *sahib* wished?'

'Perhaps it was,' King replied. 'Then again, perhaps it wasn't. Answer my question!'

The Sikh shrugged again.

'I do not know the man's name, *sahib*. I have forgotten it.'

'Then you shall come with me to the police. I understand they have ways of their own of refreshing the memories of men who have a convenient habit of forgetting. Who killed the man?'

King did not expect a direct reply from the Sikh, but the answer he got was hardly the evasion he expected.

'I could not be sure, *sahib*. It was one of three men.'

King eyed the man steadily for a full minute before speaking. Then: 'He has been dead perhaps five minutes—and not more than ten. You are alone in this house. Yet one of three men killed him. Are you one of those three?'

'But no, *sahib*. I had no hand in the murder of this unfortunate Oriental. It is no affair of mine.'

King kept his temper. Years of service with the British Indian Intelligence had taught him the wisdom of that trick. He smiled slightly, intending to disarm the Sikh.

'Perhaps you would be so kind as to tell me how this man came to be stabbed in your house?'

The smile had the intended effect. The Sikh bowed again. He raised his silken arm and pointed to a long table in the middle of the room.

'I had visitors tonight, *sahib*. Four men—I do not remember their names. I was showing the gentlemen a stone—a pigeon's-blood ruby from Burma. It is pure, *sahib*, and precious. It rested on the table in that case you see there. Of a sudden the lights were put out mysteriously. It was minutes before I could get them on again. And the ruby was gone. One of my gentlemen had stolen it. There could be no other conclusion. I moved them to shame. I scorned them and told them that I would put out the lights again and when they were again put on I should expect to see my stone in its case on the table. It was dark—there was the sudden sound of a scuffle, a scream, *sahib*. I had the light on in an instant——'

'Yes?'

'The stone was still gone, *sahib*. And this man was—stabbed.'

King watched the man closely. His revolver never wavered from its target. No man had yet caught Chowkander King asleep.

'And the other three men vanished into smoke, I take it?' he asked sarcastically.

The Sikh was not in the least offended by the tone of King's question. He merely smiled and stretched his hand again.

'The *sahib* was not quiet in coming up the stairs. The hall of

mirrors confused him, as was intended. Meantime, the other three left by other ways. There are ways—and ways—out of this house, *sahib*.'

King nodded. 'Your story may be the truth,' he said shortly. 'Nevertheless, you shall come with me. You have refused me your name. That is enough for me—and the police. Come along!'

The Sikh brushed past the curtain and moved in front of King without a word. He walked straight to the door which led into the deceptive hall and opened it. King glanced at the body of the murdered Chinaman—and what followed was too sudden for the eye to register.

With a swiftness beside which the recoil of a snake is sluggish, the Sikh snatched the jewelled dagger from his turban and leaped at King. The muzzle of King's revolver came round in an instant, but to have shot would have brought half of Delhi clamouring at the door—and that was something that certainly King wished to avoid; he was on the track of something that was not the business of half Delhi.

He darted back, raising his arm and taking the knife-slash across his sleeve. He seemed to lose his balance and fall to the floor. The Sikh laughed triumphantly and his knife flashed up again. But if the Sikh was fast—King was lightning. His left hand clenched at the floor and swung up in a wide arc. The arc ended abruptly at the point of the Sikh's black beard. Without a sound, the great form slipped down and lay motionless.

King stood over him, staring at the closed eyes and heavy beard. He fingered the tear on his own sleeve where the knife had struck him, dusted imaginary dust from both sleeves, then dug into the pocket of his tunic and produced a small notebook and pencil.

King was a methodical man; he never wasted a moment, nor did he change his direction. He had decided to take the tall Sikh to police officials and hold him in connexion with the death of the Chinaman in the fine silk robes. The fact that the Sikh lay unconscious on the floor caused no change in King's plans. It simply meant that they would be delayed. There would

be time to kill. And King went about it in his usual manner.

His pencil scrawled over the page of his notebook. He wrote a few lines, then stopped to read them.

'Moy Dong,' he read, 'the Chinaman of the High Dynasty, who has been spending so much time among the Sikh troops—is dead. He was killed in the house of Rahman Singh, the Sikh who has also been seen too often at the native barracks. Was Moy Dong killed by Rahman Singh?'

King read the note twice and shook his head. He looked again at the form on the floor at his feet. No—he did not believe that the Sikh had actually wielded the knife. But—

With the 'but', King stopped and touched the Sikh with the toe of his boot. The big native groaned and raised his head.

'As soon as you can walk,' King said slowly, 'we will go to the police office.'

It was ten minutes before the man was sufficiently revived to get to his feet. He walked unsteadily towards the hall, King's revolver pressed to his back.

They passed down the stairs thus. In the street hardly a man was visible. Delhi had long since gone to sleep.

'Walk straight, and remember, just because I didn't shoot you down like a dog the first time, doesn't mean that I would hesitate a second,' King said softly. The Sikh nodded, but did not speak. A slight smile curved his mouth—a smile that King could not see.

If King had thought that police headquarters at Delhi would welcome him, he was disappointed. The native officer in charge refused to accept the complaint of murder against the Sikh. He simply opened his mouth and goggled at the thought. He cowered when King threatened, but it was no use. He insisted on calling the captain from his bed. King argued and cajoled. He simply wanted the Sikh held till morning—but he finally gave in. Captain Kirby was awakened and summoned.

He appeared in the room ten minutes later, still apparently drugged with sleep, outwardly cursing all men who disturbed his night's rest.

'By Gad, King!' he exploded, when he caught sight of the

Secret Service man. There was no love wasted between the police and the Secret Service. 'If I'd known it was one of you bally interferers, I damn well should have told you to go to the devil! Can't you chaps ever mind your own business? I've been four solid hours getting to sleep only to be pulled from my bed to be told that some poor chap has been clouting his wife; or has war been declared and you're going back to England tomorrow? Gad! I hope it's the latter!'

King brought his gaze down from the ceiling and allowed his heels to drop back to the floor. He seemed to be controlling his patience with an effort.

'Now, if you're all done, Kirby, let me tell you why I did come,' King said quietly. 'I have unearthed a nice little murder case. The suspect is next door. Your lunkhead assistant refused to take him into custody.'

Kirby snorted.

'A murderer! A mere murderer! India's full of 'em, King. And the less we have to do with them, the better off we are. That is, unless the murderer was a white man. Then things are different. Let's have a look at him, anyway. I'm awake now—and I probably won't get to sleep again for another four hours, so I might as well make the most of it.'

Still fuming, Kirby threw open the door of the adjoining room. He stood for a moment on the sill. King could not see his face, but he heard an almost inaudible gasp. And as he heard the gasp he saw something else that nearly made him repeat the gesture of the police captain. He stared long at Kirby's feet, and then passed through the door behind the captain.

The Sikh stood motionless. Kirby turned hurriedly to King. 'Is this the prisoner?' he asked excitedly.

King nodded, not taking his eyes from the Sikh's face.

'This is the man suspected of murder, Kirby.'

Kirby groaned. His shoulders seemed to loosen, allowing his gaunt frame to sag.

'Good God!' he said breathlessly. 'What mare's nests you S.S. chaps do dig up! Take this man out and send him home. Apologize to him! Anything—only don't anger him.'

"This man is accused of murder, Kirby. It makes no difference to me if he's the god Shiva himself. I intend to prefer a charge against him and investigate a neat little plot. Don't be a fool, Kirby."

Kirby groaned again. "Fool? I a fool, King? No! You're the only fool here. You have arrested a man who practically controls the Sikh movement in Delhi. With a turn of his hand he could cause every loyal Sikh regiment to mutiny and shout for Germany. Loose him, I say, for heaven's sake!"

King turned to where the Sikh was watching the white men argue about him. They were not speaking his tongue, but he understood—and he still smiled.

"For some unknown reason you were right," King said to him. "I made a mistake. I got the wrong house. That scream I heard was a myth, and you couldn't possibly have killed that man who is dead in your house. Go!"

The Sikh smiled until his teeth gleamed. He looked straight at the eyes of Captain Kirby and turned to the door. In an instant the night had swallowed him up.

"You chaps are always getting our necks into a sling——"  
But Kirby was talking to himself. King, too, had gone.

King walked slowly down the narrow street. Two things bothered him. One was the fact that the Sikh and Kirby had had a mutual understanding. The second was that Kirby had lied about having been in bed for four hours; for beneath the bottoms of Kirby's pyjama-legs, Kirby had plainly seen the ends of a pair of regulation leather leggings. Captain Kirby would be most unlikely to go to bed for four hours and forget to remove his leggings.

King did a dangerous thing—dangerous because he was undoubtedly a marked man. He had caused the arrest of a Sikh of importance; he had angered the police captain for some reason which he was racking his brains to find out. As for the dangerous thing that King did—he stopped under a lamp in a small street and, heedless of the target he made for unfriendly bullets, he pulled out his notebook.

'Kirby mentioned twice that he had been in bed for four hours,' he wrote. 'Yet he had not taken off his leggings. Moreover, he was stunned at the sight of the Sikh. Could it be possible that Kirby was one of *the four*?'

Having made the note, King ripped the page out and made tiny fragments of it. On the next new page he made another note: 'Kirby of the police was one of the four who saw Rahman Singh's ruby.'

The doubt left him suddenly. Then King ran true to form. He had been warned to leave the Sikh alone. But if a man reputed to control the wills of the thousands of Sikh troops had for some reason killed another man—and if the trusted captain of Delhi's police was in the plot—that certainly was the business of the Secret Service.

So, contrary to the wishes of Captain Kirby, and contrary to his own good judgment, Chowkander King once more climbed the mysterious staircase and found himself in the hall of mirrors. This time he made no mistake about the door. Nor did he care whether the tall Sikh was before him or behind him. He entered the murder room with his gun in his hand and his eyes wide open.

He walked straight to the shimmering curtain—and then stopped. The body had gone.

'*Sahib!*'

The voice startled King into turning more quickly than he had intended to. A babu—a Hindu of considerable learning, naked but for a loin cloth and a cloak—confronted him.

'Well?' King snapped, assuming anger to hide his surprise.

'Taking warning, *sahib*, from a person whose name I shall not mention. Go no farther into the death of Moy Dong. He was a marked man. The *sahib* would be wise to heed the warning.'

King would have answered, but the fat babu waddled out of hearing through an unexpected door.

King swore softly and followed the babu. A few steps took him down a small corridor which turned smartly towards the right. There were no entering doors; the babu must have come

this way—and King wanted to talk earnestly with that half-naked man of learning.

At the foot of a flight of stairs, he stopped. There were three doors, all of them closed. King's eyes fastened on the middle one. It seemed to him that that one had shut the instant he got there.

There was no light inside at all; only pitch blackness and the uncanny feeling that he was not alone—that he was being watched. He walked slowly across the floor. His foot suddenly collided with something soft. In a second he had reached down and felt it and pulled his hand back with a shudder.

At least he had discovered the body of Moy Dong. He would have a chance to examine it. With a package of matches in his hand, he knelt on the floor. The first flame flared up and smoked out. But in the second of light, King had seen something that made the hair prickle at the nape of his neck.

The body was not Moy Dong's; not a Chinaman but a Hindu priest wrapped in his filthy white robe. And in the Hindu's clenched fist was a small dagger—that same that had protruded from the shoulders of Moy Dong on the floor above. King had to light a second match to make sure of the brown stain on the blade of the knife.

Once King was sure of that stain and knew it to be the blood of a man not long dead—knew it almost certainly to be the blood of Moy Dong—he turned the body of the Hindu over and held up another match.

There was no doubt as to the way the priest had met his death. The blue mouth and goggling eyes showed their tale of strangulation, and King gave his attention to the man's throat. He was surprised to find no mark—but then he turned the body back again and discovered the two deep thumb marks at the back of the neck, and he immediately visualized an enormous pair of hands—a pair of hands which King had seen not long ago. If he could have seen to write, he would have pulled out his notebook and made an entry. That entry would have read:

'Found a Hindu priest—undoubtedly Krishna, the man interested in the Sikh movement for freedom. He was killed by

severe pressure applied to the base of his skull. His hand kept hold of a bloody knife, even in death. Did he kill Moy Dong? If he did—who killed him?"

Since it was impossible for King to see to write without holding the match, and impossible for him to hold the match and write at the same time, he merely thought the entry and made his way from the room as swiftly as he could.

He could not tell where he was going, but the general direction was down. He went along another passage and up a flight of steps. At least he was out of the cellars and on the level of the street.

The faint odour of perfume came to him again, and he followed it, back to the room where he had first encountered Rahman Singh.

'*Sahib!*'

King stopped, listening. It was the same voice, undoubtedly—the voice of the fat babu. King listened.

'Heed that warning, *sahib*. Go no further into the death of Moy Dong, the Chinese. Let the death of Krishna, the Hindu, remain a mystery. Go, *sahib*, while you are safe. The *sahib* will not be warned again!'

King toyed with the butt of his revolver. He still had the feeling that he was being watched from behind—yet the babu was most certainly behind the curtain in front of him. He waited. Then:

'Babu, there are two men dead—murdered—in this house. Both those men were interested in the movement to free the Sikhs. Who killed those men?'

'*Sahib—*'

King whirled about. The voice had spoken at his elbow. The tall Sikh had come up noiselessly behind him. That explained the uncanny feeling of being watched. Rahman Singh folded his arms across his chest and lowered his head until the great black beard rested on his silk robe.

King watched him and watched the curtain from behind which the babu had spoken. It no longer swayed. The babu seemed to have gone.

'The babu is right,' Rahman Singh said in a deep voice. 'Leave the house, *sahib*. Heed the warning of Kirby *sahib* at the police station. The *sahib* is playing with fire ; fire of white heat.'

King smiled grimly. He swung his revolver loosely by the guard. He noticed that Rahman Sing's eyes seldom left the weapon. He noticed, too, that the dagger of the Sikh's turban had gone.

'Two men are dead in this house, my friend. I have seen both bodies, thanks to the babu. One, a Chinaman high in the Dynasty ; the other a Hindu priest. The first one was stabbed. The knife which stabbed the first one was in the hand of the second. The second was killed by breaking his neck——'

'The door is once more opened for the *sahib*. Do not come back !'

The smile had gone from Rahman Singh's eyes ; his last words were as the crack of a whip. King did not move. Their eyes clashed like crossed rapiers, feeling out the strength behind them.

A minute passed ; only their breathing breaking the stillness.

'Rahman Singh,' said King softly, a peculiar gleam of triumph in his eyes. 'There were four men at the table, looking at the Burma Ruby. How many of those four are still alive ?'

Only Rahman Singh's lips moved. The curtain seemed to sway. It might have been King's imagination, but he was ready for attack from any side. He remembered plainly the speed with which that jewelled dagger had been whisked from the Sikh's turban.

'Two !'

The Sikh spat the word, then slowly raised his arm and pointed to the door. 'Go—*sahib* !'

King grinned. 'All right, my friend,' he said slowly. 'I am not quite right, and I am not far wrong. *Salaam, sahib !*' With a mock bow, King closed the door behind him and ran down the steps to the street.

If King had been asked where he walked in the next hour he would have been unable to tell. He traversed most of the

narrow streets of Delhi. He went through every passage of his mind in an effort to link the murders of two men interested in a rebellion of the Sikh cavalry by a third man interested in the same thing. But he was practically certain that the third man did not murder the first two! Besides, there was the police captain who wore his leggings to bed. He—

Chowkander King stopped his walk abruptly and turned on his heel. He snapped his finger in a gesture of disgust at his own stupidity—and went charging full speed along the small street in the direction of the police office.

As he rounded the last corner he put on an additional burst of speed. There was a crowd of curiosity-mad natives packed thickly about the door. King pushed through, sweating, impatient. A gaunt arm seized his shoulder. He looked into a pair of hard grey eyes above a sandy beard. Commander Carron had evidently dressed in a hurry; his tunic was unbuttoned half down the front.

'King! Thank God you've come! We've been looking over half Delhi for you. There's the devil's own mess here. Come inside—'

King interrupted him, striding past into the room.

'How was he killed?'

'Killed? How—'

'Kirby—how was Kirby killed, Carron? Knifed—or strangled? Don't stand there gawking, Carron! For heaven's sake, speak up. You've been searching half Delhi for me; I'm here. Tell me what I want to know.'

Carron told him. 'Poisoned, King. Bite of a tarantula. Got it in a box in the next room. But how the devil you know—'

"I didn't know. I guessed—when I was half a mile away in Chadni Chowk. I ran into a little play-acting tonight. Four men viewed a particularly famous Burma Ruby in the house of Rahman Singh, the chap who has been influencing the Sikhs against British rule. Two of those four men are dead. I took Rahman Singh into custody and Kirby refused to book him; told me I was crazy to play with the man who held the destinies of the Sikhs in the palm of his hand. And Kirby pretended I

had got him out of bed where he had been four hours getting to sleep. But I noticed that he had his leggings on under his pyjamas. Fool that I was, I have only just ten minutes ago realized why Kirby has his leggings on! How do you know it was the tarantula?"

Carron had regained some of his dignity.

"No doubt of it, King. The guard heard a sort of thump, and pushed open the door of Kirby's room. Kirby was lying on the floor with that great hairy spider on his cheek. It must have bitten him while he was asleep and the poison worked slowly. We have caught the man who did it, so there is no mystery there. The fellow evidently had the spider and wanted to put Kirby out of the way. He simply went into Kirby's room when Kirby was asleep and loosed the insect. He waited a little too long—"

"Who was it?" King snapped the words.

Carron smiled a smile of satisfaction. At least there was one thing King didn't know. "A babu—"

"A fat babu? Nearly naked? Waddles when he walks—?"

The smile went from Carron's face again. He nodded.

"He's in the guardroom. Know him?"

"Of course. He's the fourth man who saw the Burma Ruby at Rahman Singh's."

"The fourth? Who the devil were the other three?"

Kirby extended three fingers of his right hand and took hold of the first.

"One—the first was Moy Dong, the Chinaman. The second was Krishna, the Hindu priest. The third—was Kirby. The fourth—the babu. The only thing I don't quite understand is how Rahman Singh comes into the picture. Also, where is the Burma Ruby? Get the babu. Bring him to this room and leave him here with me. I have a few questions I want to ask him; then you can do what you like with him. Get him up here right away!"

Carron went to the door and gave an order. A minute later the half-naked babu came in. At sight of King he shrank back, a look of genuine fear upon his oily face.

'Sahib—I know nothing—nothing at all. I only came with a message—a message from Rahman Singh to Kirby *sahib*—and Kirby *sahib* was dead. I know nothing, *sahib*!'

'Sit down, *babu*!' King said sharply. The *babu* slumped heavily into a straight-backed chair and King turned to Carron.

'He won't talk if you're here, Carron. Go out; see those curtains over there?' King whispered now and indicated the swinging portieres with a wave of his hand. 'Go through the next room and get behind those curtains from the other side. Listen—but don't move. Don't even breathe if it makes a noise! And don't come out under any circumstances till I call you. Plain?'

Carron understood. He went through the door without even glancing at the *babu*.

'Now,' said King, drawing a chair to the table. 'Babuji, the time when you know nothing is past. This is the time when you know something; just how much you know, I am going to find out.'

A faint rustle of silk told King that Carron was in his place.

'Sahib, I know nothing!'

'What was the message you brought from Rahman Singh to Kirby? Hand it over to me.'

'I have lost it, *sahib*. I do not know where it is.'

King rapped sharply on the table. The door opened; a tall Sikh guard stood at salute.

'Guard! Take this man out! Have that filthy loin cloth stripped from him. I'm looking for a message to Captain Kirby. Turn him inside out!'

The big Sikh grinned; he hated *babus*. In two strides he was at the naked man's side. The *babu* shrank back. The thought of losing his loin cloth appalled him.

'Nay, *sahib*,' he wailed. 'There wasn't any message. Do not let him touch me. Do not! There wasn't any message!'

King nodded, his lips a thin, compressed line. 'I thought as much. You came here to put the spider in Captain Kirby's room, not to deliver a message from Rahman Singh at all.'

The *babu* squirmed and held out his hands, palms up to the ceiling. 'No, *sahib*! I did not come to put the spider in the room

of Kirby *sahib*. I came to deliver a message from Rahman Singh.'

'You said there wasn't any message.'

'There wasn't, *sahib*. None that I could hand over to you. It was what you call by word of mouth. A verbal message.'

'Then what was it?' King demanded. 'Repeat it.'

'That I cannot do, *sahib*. So much has happened since that I cannot even remember the first word of it. I swear it, *sahib*.'

King leant forward and thrust a finger under the babu's nose.

'If there was a message, babu, repeat it. If there was no message, you came here to murder Kirby *sahib* as you murdered Moy Dong, the Chinaman, and as you murdered Krishna, the Hindu. What was that message that Rahman Singh sent to Captain Kirby? Answer me!'

'*Sahib*, you are mistaken! I did not murder Moy Dong. The death of Krishna was unfortunate, but I did not kill him. The *sahib*—'

'What was that message?'

The babu looked into King's eyes and his red face blanched. 'Only this, *sahib*,' he said, looking at the floor. 'Rahman Singh wished me to say to Kirby *sahib*, "If you have it, give it up. It is not worth the price you will have to pay."

'And did Kirby *sahib* give it up when you came for it?' King asked quickly.

'No, *sahib*, no. He—'

The babu stopped abruptly. His face was the colour of chalk. He gripped the table edge and watched the grin of triumph spread over King's face.'

'Ah!' said King softly. 'Kirby *sahib* refused to give it up. So you simply loosed the spider—waited until the deadly poison had taken its effect on him—then took it from him. And since you couldn't find it at once, you had no opportunity to make a getaway. If you found what you were looking for, it is on you now—or else it is in Kirby *sahib*'s room! Guard!'

The big Sikh was still near the door.

'Strip that rag from his carcase. Whatever he took from Kirby *sahib* will be there, unless he's swallowed it.'

'No, no, no, no, *sahib*.' The babu seemed to shrink into a mere mass of flesh. 'I will tell everything, everything. Only send away the other *sahib*. I will tell you alone. I promise.'

King signalled the guard to leave the room and waited until he had closed the door behind him. He glanced at the swaying curtain and it was with some satisfaction that he realized that Carron was still there.

'Now, *babuji*, everything! Starting with the death of Moy Dong and ending with the death of Kirby *sahib*.'

'I know nothing of the death of Moy Dong—'

'Starting with the death of Moy Dong,' King repeated, paying no attention to the babu's words. 'At the time of the showing of the Burma Ruby at Rahman Singh's house, there were four men present, besides the Sikh himself. The stone was on the table in a case. The lights went out. What happened next?'

The babu shook his round head.

'I do not know, *sahib*. It was so long ago; my memory on such things is poor. I cannot remember—'

'See if you can remember this'—King's finger went under the babu's nose again. 'You'll tell all you know and tell it quickly, or you'll go to the scaffold for the death of Captain Kirby. I'll give you just one minute to tell what took place the instant the lights were turned out. One minute!'

The babu held his stomach and shook with fright, either real or assumed.

'I'll tell, *sahib*, everything—immediately. But I must have water. My throat is parched.'

King called for drinks. The guard came in with two glasses of native wine and set them on the table. King watched the babu carefully and thought he saw just the slightest sign of triumph on the fat face.

'What happened, babu?' he repeated, when the native had sipped his wine and replaced his glass on the table.

'There was a slight movement near me, *sahib*. When the lights went on again, the ruby had gone. Rahman Singh was angry. He had the lights darkened again in order that the thief should replace the jewel. This time there was a scuffle. There was the

blow of a knife—a scream—and the *sahib's* footbeats on the stairs. There were many ways from Rahman Singh's house. The others escaped, leaving the Chinaman on the floor.'

The babu stopped and sipped his wine. King stared straight at the swaying curtain and thought.

'Moy Dong was killed by one of the four men. Which one, babu?'

'That I do not know, *sahib*. The lights were out. It was pitch-black. I sensed only the movement at my side.'

King stood up. He walked around the babu's back and past the curtain to the door. As he passed the hangings, he mouthed the words, 'Don't move!' At the door, he whispered into the ear of the Sikh guard, then walked slowly back to his seat.

Behind the curtain, Carron's heart beat faster. He had seen something that King had not seen. The instant King's back had turned, the babu had snatched a tiny phial from his belt and emptied it into King's glass. In a moment he had replaced the container and resumed his expression of ignorance and innocence.

'Now,' King went on, as though there had been no interruption. 'One of those four took the ruby. Moy Dong took it first from the table. He was killed—'

The explosion of a rifle just outside the door stopped him. The babu jumped, swung round, half got up, then slumped back.

King was lighting a cigarette. 'It's nothing,' he said evenly. 'The guard ordered the crowd from the door and shot over their heads to frighten them. I was saying—Moy Dong must have taken the ruby from the table. Whoever knifed him wanted the stone. Who wanted the stone? Or, rather, babu, who *didn't* want the stone?'

King picked up his glass. The eyes of the babu grew wider. He watched every movement of King's hand from the table to his mouth. He watched King drink, with only a slight stiffening of his muscles. He sat back and waited.

'Who *didn't* want the ruby, babu? Who—*didn't*—want—the—ruby? You—killer!'

King's voice trailed away. His eyes were open, but only a trifle. His chest heaved; he seemed to stop breathing and his head fell on his breast. The babu got up and stood leaning on the table, grinning maliciously.

'Ah—the *sahib* was so clever! So utterly clever! But he forgot that others were clever, too! Moy Dong *did* take the Burmese Ruby. He *was* killed for it. Krishna killed him with one blow of his knife. He ran to the cellars in an effort to escape, but Kirby *sahib* was too quick for him. With a twist of his powerful hands he broke the Hindu's neck. Broke it, *sahib*!'

The babu seemed to grow taller. He had lost his hesitating manner of speech. The uncertainty of words had gone. His voice boomed a deep bass. King's head sagged. Only the table kept him from sliding to the floor.

'That was two, *sahib*. But there was the other. Krishna—who was trying to make himself an independent ruler; Moy Dong, who would have made the Sikhs many promises on behalf of his Chinese ruler; Kirby *sahib*, a traitor to his country. He wanted gold only. He was a puppet; they were all puppets. But they all interfered with my plans. And my plans, *sahib*, were the biggest of all. I will tell you; in the event of the world war we hear about, the great cavalry troops would have rebelled and fought for Germany. For Germany, *sahib*! I could not fail!'

The babu stopped. He seemed to be out of breath. King never moved. The babu might have been talking to an empty room. He went on. His eyes gleamed, his voice grew softer.

'Look at me, *sahib*. But you can't. No matter. Think of me with this filthy grease washed from my body; with shoes whose soles are four inches thick to give me height; with my head swathed in fifty yards of finest silks; with my body draped in a flowing robe and my face hidden behind a black beard. Think, *sahib*. I will tell you, for you will never use the knowledge. I am Rahman Singh, the Sikh! As the Sikh I played upon the sympathy of the regiments. As Rahman Singh I invited my enemies—my greedy enemies—to my house. I showed them a piece of worthless red glass—worthless, *sahib*!—gave them a

chance to steal it and stood back while they threw everything aside for greed ; watched them kill each other for possession of what was not worth the life of an infidel !

'The clever *sahib* ! You were warned—twice warned. You thought you could match wits with Rahman Singh. You had the wine brought in and drank it. Be careful, *sahib*, in this land where the art of poisoning is as old as the god of death himself. Never drink with an enemy—unless he be a dead one, or nearly dead. To you, *sahib*, who will be dead in a few moments from poison, I shall drink. To you—and to Germany's success !'

The babu—still the babu in looks, with his fat stomach and rounded face—but with the carriage and bearing of the tall Sikh, picked his glass from the table and balanced it neatly in his hand. He threw back his head with a deep laugh.

'To the careless *sahib* !' he said, and drained the glass.

For an instant he stood as still as a stone image. His eyes looked straight ahead ; the eyes of a man suddenly gone blind. The smile faded from his round face. His head jerked back, the glass clattered to the floor.

Rahman Singh tried to shout, but the words stuck in his throat. With a quick rush, the poison seized him. He fell across the table, his head not a foot from King's face.

'You—devil !' he gasped, and quivered.

Chowkander King got up and rubbed his arms.

'Never drink with an enemy unless you are sure he is dead, Rahman Singh,' he said slowly. Then : 'All right, Carron. Come out !'

The curtain parted. The commander's face glistened with sweat. He walked across the room unsteadily.

'Good God, King ! What an ordeal ! If I hadn't seen you go to the door and tell the sentry to shoot his gun—if I hadn't seen you switch glasses when the babu turned round to see what was happening—if it hadn't been for those two things, King, I should have thought you were a goner, sure, and I should have put a bullet right through that greasy head. How the devil did you know that he had poisoned the wine ? You were over at the door when he dropped the stuff from the phial.'

King stooped down and picked the glass from the floor, sniffed it and set it on the table.

"There is only one person who likes water less than an Indian babu of this one's class ; and that is an Indian fakir, who thinks it most unholy to touch the stuff. When a pure, unadulterated babu asks you for a glass of water—watch out. I was only guessing—and guessing wildly. But my suspicion was that he wanted it for that particular purpose. Then, he was terrified every time I threatened to have him searched. He had something he was deathly afraid to have us find on him. You will find when you investigate that Kirby was killed with the same poison. The scent of almonds was strong in the room, and that meant—prussic acid. The spider was merely to make it look natural. The bite of the tarantula would have made him deathly sick and killed him slowly. Death from prussic acid in its native state is nearly instantaneous."

Carron made no reply. He watched Chowkander King lift Rahman Singh's lifeless form from the table and place it gently on the floor. Then he said :

"For a moment, I nearly rushed out and spoilt your party, King. When your eyes began to stick out and you got blue in the face. I had my gun pointing right at his chest."

King grinned and fingered his throat tenderly.

"Don't think for a minute, Carron," he said, seriously, "that any half-baked imitation of a man dying would have gone over with an arch fiend like Rahman Singh—a man who so cunningly got rid of his competitors by showing them a worthless ruby, telling them a fabulous tale of its value—and then standing by to watch them kill one another for the possession of it. I held my breath until I nearly choked. I'm afraid I was nearly as dead as Rahman Singh thought I was!"

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